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Pilgrimage: Place and Remembrance in Spiritual Formation

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JOHN RICHTER

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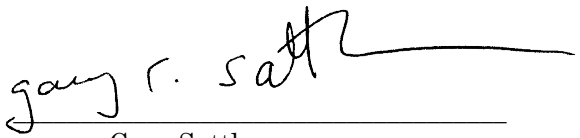

Gary Sattler

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PILGRIMAGE:
PLACE AND REMEMBRANCE IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER
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SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JOHN RICHTER
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ABSTRACT

Pilgrimage:
Place and Remembrance in Spiritual Formation
John Richter
Doctor of Ministry
School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary
2012

The purpose of this project was to encourage the spiritual maturation of the members of St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church (hereafter, St. John's) in Cullman, Alabama via an analysis and practice of the spiritual discipline of pilgrimage. The motivation for the study stemmed from a lack of congregational understanding of the rich traditions and theological heritage of St. John's. Travel, it was hoped, would help congregants gain a better understanding of their identity as Christians generally and as members of St. John's specifically.

Analysis of the history of Cullman and of St. John's and a historical and theological examination of pilgrimage provide the basis for the study. Argued herein is that pilgrimage, which includes travel and historical, theological, and scriptural reflection, is an optimal means to discerning one's personal, as well as corporate, identity. A series of pilgrimages is proposed, encouraging participants to learn about the roots of the Christian faith (Israel), the spread of the faith (Greece and Rome), and the particular expression of faith practiced at St. John's (Germany and Reformation sites).

Due to extenuating factors, the project has begun under less than desired conditions. An initial journey to Israel was made with fewer than expected participants, though the experience of those pilgrims affirmed the basic thesis that pilgrimage is a valuable tool for Christians to develop a stronger sense of identity. An unintended benefit has been that the process prompted the writer to reflect more creatively on how to communicate the congregation's identity to a broader audience. Specifically, this resulted in a series of sermons on the name St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church, a series widely appreciated by members and friends of the congregation alike. Aforementioned circumstances will dictate whether or not the sequence of pilgrimages can be completed.

Theological Mentor: Kurt Fredrickson, PhD

Words: 292

For fellow pilgrims
And for Tiffany, as we raise Vella and John Isaac in the pilgrim way

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INTRODUCTION

Planes, trains, and automobiles. They have made the world a smaller place and opened a world of opportunity for the would-be traveler. Couple this with an obsession to be entertained and global tourism booms as more than a mere cottage industry. Travel, whether involved journeys around the globe or simple weekend excursions, is very much a part of life for many Americans. For those living in Cullman, Alabama, little stands in the way of entertaining activities that attract and compete for people's attention. Distance rarely prohibits activities, as lives are seemingly built on, and ruled by, the desire to play. Indeed, work and play and working to be able to play are driving cultural forces.

People on the Go: A Culture Busy with Leisure

Another fall Saturday morning rolls around. Alabamians are decked in their orange and blue and crimson and white. Tens of thousands of football fans will gather in Auburn and Tuscaloosa to root passionately for their teams, many of them arriving the night before to begin a weekend party that includes barbecue, beer, and plenty of catching up between old college friends. It is not uncommon for festivities to continue after the game into the wee hours of Sunday morning. The same scenario will be played out in Baton Rouge, Oxford, Athens, Ann Arbor, Norman, and other college towns throughout the country.

Tickets are not easy to come by, nor are they cheap. The price for a ticket to an Auburn game is $50 with SEC games starting at $70. Fans of the team in Tuscaloosa do not fare any better where they will pay $80 per ticket for conference games. As the season develops, many will pay much more for important games through various ticket

clearing houses such at Stubhub. Acquiring premium seats requires fans to make significant contributions to the school and purchase season tickets. Additionally, fans must foot the bill for the price of travel, food and drink for pre- and post- game parties, fan wear, parking, and lodging. Indeed, some fans invest in RVs, pay thousands of dollars for reserved camping spots near campus, and drive back and forth for home and away games, making a series of weekend-long getaways.

It is not farfetched to suggest that the dominant religion in Alabama, the heart of the Bible Belt, is college football. In spite of a weak economy and a struggling education budget, Alabamians spare no expense when it comes to their favorite pastime.[1] Although the value of athletics in the life of children and teenagers can be paramount in building confidence and a positive self image, the value of athletics as entertainment is certainly less beneficial. Still, on game day fans fill stadiums, pack into living rooms, and spend millions of dollars in the hope of yet another victory.

Fascination with football is not the whole story though, and similar patterns will repeat themselves throughout the year. Another spring weekend nears. The days get longer and the weather warmer. The three o'clock bell rings Friday afternoon, another week is done, and a weekend escape is imminent. Boat covers are removed, gas tanks filled, and engines revved, and waterskiing and tubing will soon bring smiles to children's faces. Relatives and friends congregate, and charcoal fires light up the shore, as lake-home beds are made and shelves dusted. While some families evacuate towns for

[1] For example, Nick Saban of the University of Alabama earns over $5 million a year plus incentives and other opportunities that come with being head football coach. Gene Chizik of Auburn earned just over $3.5 million as a base salary after leading the Tigers to a 2010 national championship, before being released after the 2012 season. In 2011 Auburn had the highest paid assistant coaching staff in the nation, totaling $4 million, including a hefty $1.3 million for then-offensive coordinator Gus Malzahn.

their second home and the waters of Smith Lake, others make a more dedicated five-hour drive south to coastal condominiums for some sun in Fort Morgan, Gulf Shores, or Orange Beach.

Still others will load up the car with bats, balls, a glove, and a pair of cleats. Travel ball begins for kids in kindergarten and does not end until high school graduation. Children and parents spend weekends on the ball field and bed down between games in hotel rooms, each making a serious financial investment in their children's athletic interests. The commitment also includes weekday practices in the afternoons, special camps and training sessions, as well as a host of fees and registration expenses.

These forms of entertainment have proved to be big business, too. Tourism on Alabama's small strip of Gulf Coast is a billion-dollar-a-year industry, while homes on Smith Lake in Cullman County often command premium prices of up to a million dollars. The city of Cullman itself has reckoned that athletics is a good investment and has built a variety of sports complexes, aimed at attracting soccer, baseball, and softball tournaments, as well as swim meets. Tourism in north Alabama is also a billion-dollar-a-year industry, of which Cullman's Smith Lake and sports facilities are a part.

Other pricey, leisurely escapes exist as well. Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida is a prime example. In just ten hours, residents of Cullman can reach the happiest place on earth. Said happiness, however, comes with the price tag of $85 for a one-day single park entry pass. Several "money saving" options exist for families planning a more extensive stay, and a family of four can enjoy four nights lodging at a "value resort" with park passes for about $1800, excluding meals and transportation.

Add to this other recreational activities, travel, and traditional forms of media entertainment and it is easy to see that the residents of Alabama are people who crave and indulge in leisure activities. Each of these pursuits also consumes much of the energies of the people of Cullman, as well as the members of St. John's. Although none of the aforementioned activities is inherently wrong, one does wonder how the faithful might fare, even how the Church of Jesus Christ might fare, if Christians approached times of leisure as opportunities for growth in their life with Christ. A personal experience illustrates my hope that together the members of St. John's can make such an investment.

People on the Go: A Personal Witness to the Power of Travel

I caught the travel bug early. As a child, I loved falling asleep in the backseat of the family car as miles of asphalt passed underneath. While a teenager, I relished road trips with my friends in church vans and chartered buses as we headed to the next youth conference in Atlanta, Orlando, or some other dot on the map. Though my parents traveled primarily in the southeast, they dutifully dragged me to old historic homes, manicured gardens, and other places undesirable to your average adolescent and teenager. The food we ate along the way made the boring stuff more tolerable, but rarely did I consciously engage my surroundings.

Somewhere along the way, though, something strange happened. As a student at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, those forsaken destinations reared their once-ugly heads, and I found myself majoring in history. The climax of my now piqued curiosity about old stuff and dead people arrived my senior year of college when I headed to Oxford, England for a study abroad program. Raised in the church and interested in

things religious from an early age, much of my academic motivation stemmed from my Christian commitment. Though a student at UAB, I journeyed to Oxford with thirty-four other students from Moorhead State University in Minnesota, an experience that proved to shape profoundly my spiritual life.

The trip began under somewhat suspect circumstances when another student, nicknamed Lojak, shot Jack Daniels and other strong liquors every chance he got on the flight between New York and London. My prayers began early, as I wondered what I had gotten myself into and pontificated about the coming months in what was proving to be a rather faith-challenging environment. Once on the ground in England, however, I quickly began engaging students from outside the Bible Belt in more meaningful ways. I had religious and philosophical discussions with my peers from Minnesota, North and South Dakota, and even California. A few of these traveling companions quickly became fellow pilgrims as we worshipped on weekends together in a variety of churches, including Lutheran, Anglican, Orthodox, Baptist, Methodist, and Catholic. In the classroom, we engaged the world of Medieval religion and politics and saints and relics. I witnessed firsthand the towering influence the Church had exercised on Western history with every cathedral we entered, and I caught a tiny glimpse of patience in learning about how towns and villages and artisans and craftsmen might spend their entire lives on projects they would never see completed. All of this reminded me that God is a vast God, an awesome God, and I felt I glimpsed, if only briefly, his eternal nature. The God who made and loved me and my home had made this world and these people I was encountering, and he was equally concerned about them and about our life together here on planet earth. Put

simply, God used an escape from my routine and geographical environment to open my eyes literally and figuratively, allowing me to encounter him and his handiwork in people and places previously unknown. Though an academic program, studying abroad became a deeply spiritual experience because of my commitment to Christ, and travel became a means of celebrating God's creation, an avenue of growth, and a path to a deeper self-understanding.

People on the Go: An Opportunity to Grow

That experience in 1995 provides much of the motivation for the project before me now, some sixteen years later. I have reveled in all the entertainment and leisure activities described above. I have sat in the stands for football games in Auburn, Tuscaloosa, Oxford, Baton Rouge, and even Pasadena. I have made more than my share of trips for happiness to the Magic Kingdom. I have taken staff meetings at Smith Lake on our music minister's boat. I have lain in the sands outside member-owned condominiums in Gulf Shores, and I have taken great pleasure in each of these experiences, especially as my senior year of college still informs them. Now when I travel, I expect to see God in both subtle and profound ways, but it took a grand adventure for my perspective to change. It took a particular experience for my eyes and ears to be opened. It took an unmerited moment of mercy for me see God's presence and work is more manifest than I had previously realized. It took an unexpected pilgrimage abroad to learn more about who I am and who God made me to be.

Before St. John's is the choice of becoming such pilgrims and growing deeper in our commitment to Christ or accepting the status quo, haphazardly going through

spiritually stagnant motions that do not lead to a more mature understanding of who God has called us to be as Christians or as a congregation. As a pastor, I trust that the members of St. John's are grateful for the privileges afforded them by living in this time and place. I also trust their faith is genuine and real and growing, but my suspicion is that many have not thought of their vacations and their times of leisure, which occupies much of their energies, as some of the best opportunities to grow in faith. It seems many distractions in this world, both good and bad, cause them to lose sight of their identity in Christ and as members of St. John's. It seems too that many have neglected to see themselves as pilgrims or life as a pilgrimage, and are missing many God-given glimpses of his work, grace, and presence in their lives. Indeed, in pilgrimage God reveals himself, makes known who he has made us to be, and opens our eyes to see how he sojourns with us every day. A series of pilgrimages, as set forth in this project, will provide a starting point to dig deeper into discovering our identity and our calling at St. John's and will serve as a catalyst for genuine spiritual progress.

PART ONE

MINISTRY CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

CULLMAN, ALABAMA: THE ALLURE OF THE RURAL SOUTH

> From an untamed wilderness so unproductive it was shunned by the Indians, to one of the richest agricultural areas in the southeastern United States—that, in a nutshell, is the history of Cullman County Alabama.
>
> –Margaret Jean Jones, *Combing Cullman County*

Nestled in the rolling hills of north Alabama, Cullman is a small but prosperous town that celebrates its down-home charm and congenial pace of life. Historically, Cullman and Cullman County flourished as an agricultural community, but recent decades have witnessed the rise of a growing industrial sector. Contributing to this change is Cullman's location on Interstate 65, forty-five minutes north of Birmingham, the state's largest city, and forty-five minutes southwest of Huntsville, another of the state's larger urban communities. In this context Cullman celebrates its rural roots and yet confidently expects a bright future.

The city boasts of an excellent public school system (on Alabama standards) and several private schools provide opportunity for Christian education as well. While Cullman County is home to Wallace State Community College, several universities and Beeson Divinity School are also within commuting distance. Opportunities for arts

enthusiasts and athletic devotees also abound in the wider region, creating an atmosphere for people of varied interests to flourish. Generally speaking, residents of Cullman hold their community in high regard and want to see it grow in a way that fits with the identity of a small but progressive town.

Two recent phenomena have highlighted this notion. Cullman has been a "dry county" for several decades and just voted to go "wet" in 2010, forcing the townspeople to rethink the possibilities for their community. The devastating tornadoes that struck Cullman in the spring of 2011 have also forced the town to reexamine its future, as significant rebuilding will take place in the downtown area. These historical and contemporary factors have influenced the character of St. John's and provide the context in which the congregation continues to exist. A more detailed examination of the community provides the framework for current and future ministry.

History: John G. Cullman and German Immigration

Although Cullman is a post-bellum community, the German settlers who arrived after the Civil War were likely influenced by the same religious and cultural factors that characterized German immigration throughout the 1800s.[1] Both Rationalism and Pietism shaped their worldview, while more immediate economic and political developments prompted many Germans to immigrate to America. A brief word on these matters will help to locate the community in American history and St. John's in appropriate historical context.

[1] Although St. John's was a part of the Evangelical and Reformed Church and the United Church of Christ, it first joined the Evangelical Synod of North America, a predecessor denomination of the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Therefore, my brief remarks about German immigration reflect those influences of the nineteenth century, that is those most connected with the shaping of the Evangelical Synod.

The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century celebrated the use of human reason as the basis for solving problems, resolving conflict, and improving the lot of humanity. If one could simply collect the appropriate scientific (observable) data, then no mystery was beyond resolution. Accordingly, human progress seemed limitless. Such a view often found itself in conflict with religious thought. Though enlightened thinkers such as Jefferson in America and Locke in England sought to resolve this conflict through their scholarly work, rationalists and religionists frequently remained at odds. As Rationalism exerted its influence throughout the European continent, the Church was not unaffected, and a more staid orthodoxy resulted. In response, many Christians sought to reinvigorate Christendom with a faith that reflected the life-transforming experiences modeled in the Bible. One such movement was Pietism.

Hugo Kamphausen describes the situation thusly, "Left unsatisfied by the preaching of morality and rationality, devout souls turned to the Scriptures and prayer in their search for a life in God."[2] An experiential brand of faith emerged, characterized, according to Theophil Menzel, by "a warm spirit, readiness to serve men as children of God, and an irenic attitude to others."[3] Whereas Rationalism held that humanity is the measure of all things and maintained a complete confidence in human reason, Pietism understood humans as creatures of God, dependent upon him, and in need of redemption and guidance beyond human wisdom.[4] In other words, there was a fundamental

[2] Hugo Kamphausen, *The Story of the Religious Life in the Evangelical Synod of North America*, trans. John W. Flucke (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1924), 7.

[3] Theophil Menzel, *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church*, ed. Lowell Zuck (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 152.

[4] Ibid., 164.

difference in how these two groups viewed the world and how the common needs of humanity were to be met.

If all Germans were not united by a common worldview, many were united by a desire for liberty. Whereas political and religious freedoms and economic opportunities were limited in Germany, opportunities for Rationalist, Pietist, and all those in between abounded in the Western hemisphere. Carl Schneider describes the situation thusly, "The economic depression in Germany coincided with years of plenty in America; the politically oppressed were inspired by the prospects of American democracy; the gloom of ecclesiastical tyranny was brightened by the promise of religious freedom in the New World."[5] Cheap land and self-determination were enough to prompt many Germans to migrate and begin afresh in a new land.

One such German was Colonel Johann Gottfried Cullman. Arriving in America in 1865, Cullman had been on the losing end, economically and politically, of the Revolution of 1848 and again in a rebellion against Bismarck in the 1860s. Born in the small town of Frankweiler in 1823, Cullman studied civil engineering at Zweibrücken and embarked upon a mercantile career after graduation. When political unrest began to grow in 1848, Cullman joined the insurgency in Bavaria, serving as a Colonel in the revolution. Later, rumors held he was involved in a plot to assassinate Bismarck in 1863. Having lost small financial fortunes twice in the politically charged climate of Germany, Cullman decided to leave his homeland. He traveled first to New York and then Philadelphia before heading west to Cincinnati. It was in Ohio that he conceived the idea

[5] Carl Schneider, *The German Church on the American Frontier* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008), 1.

of establishing a German colony for immigrants fleeing the poor economic and political conditions of the homeland.[6]

In 1872 the Louisville and Nashville Railroad acquired and completed rail lines from the South and North Railroad which ran through north Alabama. Soon afterwards, Cullman met with Alabama Governor Robert Patton about establishing a settlement along the lines. Patton supplied Cullman with horses, wagons, and supplies to explore the area. By January of 1873 Cullman revisited Cincinnati – one of the centers of German immigration and culture in America – to begin recruiting settlers. He returned to Alabama in April with the town's first five families, a total of fourteen people, to settle what he billed as "die deutsche Kolonie von Nord Alabama."[7] Local historian Margaret Jean Jones notes, "Attracted by Col. Cullman's enthusiastic lectures extolling climatic and other advantages over settlement in the West, as well as by the cheap land which was selling for fifty cents to $1.25 an acre, one hundred and twenty-three families had joined the colony by January 1874. Mostly mechanics, craftsmen, and shopkeepers, these new settlers came from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois."[8]

The population reached 6,355 by 1880 when Cullman would begin a new recruiting campaign.[9] Jones comments,

> Some of the first movements of German immigrants to arrive in Cullman came by way of the northern and eastern states where they had originally settled upon reaching America. But Col. Cullman's personal letter writing campaign which he began in 1880 spurred a second movement of Bavarians, Saxons and other

[6] Margaret Jean Jones, *Combing Cullman County* (Cullman, AL: Modernistic Printers, 1971), 6-7.

[7] Ibid., 8, 12.

[8] Ibid., 13.

[9] Ibid., 26.

> nationalities directly from Europe. Among them were Catholics from Baden-Baden and Protestants from Nuremberg, Wartenberg, Prussia, and Switzerland. Many of these could not read, speak or understand English.[10]

The population of Cullman increased dramatically, rising to 17,849 by 1900,[11] but life was not easy for the earliest settlers. Again, Jones observes,

> Like most pioneering groups, the new colonists were not only financially poor but also poorly equipped to cope with their strange surroundings . . . The colonists found to their dismay that the diversified crops and agricultural practices that had worked so well in the rich soil of their native Rhine Valley would not work on the poor soil of the North Alabama plateau…One early settler remarked that, "The soil was so poor we should not have stayed; but we were too poor to leave."[12]

Political oppression and economic opportunity had prompted Cullman to flee his home country for freedom and a new start. The thought of beginning anew with others of a like ethnicity provided further motivation for others to join him. The forces that led to the settling of Cullman and founding of St. John's, then, were not unlike those that led other Germans to immigrate to the United States in the nineteenth century. Larger socio-cultural influences like Pietism and Rationalism also shaped, if only subtly, the German colony of north Alabama. Today, Cullman residents remain optimistic about their future, in spite of recent social changes and natural upheaval, and, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter and in Chapter 2, it is an optimism encouraged by the Christian faith, which continues to play an important part in shaping the character of the community.

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[10] Margaret Jean Jones, *Cullman County across the Years* (Cullman, AL: Modernistic Printers, 1975), 3.

[11] Jones, *Combing*, 26.

[12] Ibid., 14-15.

Population Demographics: Size, Ethnicity, and Place

Before John G. Cullman and his recruits arrived to settle in north Alabama in the spring of 1873, the area that would become Cullman County was only sparsely populated. According to Jones's studies, records indicate that some white settlers arrived in the area as early as 1812. This was two years before the formal removal of native inhabitants from north Alabama in 1814.[13] As noted, Cullman's arrival sparked rapid growth in the region. Two hundred and fifty families settled in Cullman by the end of the year, with the population exceeding six thousand by 1880. Almost eighteen thousand residents called Cullman home in 1900.[14]

Today the city of Cullman is the county seat of Cullman County and retains a celebrated small-town atmosphere. The population of the city itself is a mere 14,745, according to the 2010 census, while the county boasts of 80,376 residents. The other municipalities within Cullman County are considerably smaller than the city of Cullman. The next largest township is Hanceville with a population of 2,982, followed by Good Hope, which numbers 2,264. The county as a whole lacks any significant racial diversity. The most recent statistics indicate that roughly 96 percent of residents are White, 1percent Black, and fewer than 3 percent Hispanic. [15]

It is helpful to note, too, how the community compares with its surroundings. Regarding population, the Cullman Economic Development Agency (CEDA) highlights that Cullman and its adjacent counties have a population of roughly 500,000. This does

[13] Ibid., 2, 4.

[14] Jones, *Across the Years*, 3; Jones, *Combing*, 26.

[15]Fact sheet distributed by Cullman County Chamber of Commerce.

not include Birmingham (Jefferson County) or Huntsville (Madison County), which are both less than an hour away. The population of the Birmingham metro area is well over 600,000, while Huntsville's is over 300,000. Though small compared to Jefferson and Madison counties and to the more populated regions of the country, Cullman County ranks within the top twenty in population in Alabama, whose total population is just over 4.7 million.

The county's website describes the area this way: "Cullman County covers 743 square miles of land on the Cumberland Plateau, much of it devoted to agricultural pursuits, and has a population of over 73,000. Some of those people were born here and come by their love of Cullman County naturally, while others are transplanted from locales spanning the globe, choosing to live and work here because they have been charmed by the pastoral beauty of the land and the friendly, easygoing nature of its people."[16] It is in this context that St. John's seeks to present the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although the responsibility (and opportunity) for multi-racial ministry is minimal due to a relatively homogonous culture, St. John's must still be aware of the possibilities that do exist, possibilities informed primarily by the way of life of the community's residents.

Economic Trends: Agriculture and Industry

Cullman is a very prosperous community on regional standards. The area thrived historically as an agriculture-based economy and local farms are still prosperous today. According to the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, "Cullman County leads the state in agricultural production. Major agricultural products include poultry, beef cattle,

[16] Cullman County Commission, "About Cullman County," http://www.co.cullman.al.us/aboutcullmancounty.htm (accessed December 1, 2011).

sweet potatoes, nursery plants, corn and forest products. Cullman County is ranked as one of the top 60 counties in America in total agricultural income."[17] The community has diversified in recent decades and now features a strong industrial sector as well. Cullman has been recognized as a leading micropolitan,[18] ranking 41st of 576 nationally and third in the state of Alabama.[19]

How the community markets itself is also telling. CEDA highlights several attributes of Cullman in its attempt to promote the community to businesses looking to expand or build. Folsom Field, for example, offers a full service airport with a 6,300'x100' runway, 40 t-hangers and a pilot's lounge. Similarly, Birmingham and Huntsville International Airports are only a forty-five minute drive and Nashville and Atlanta International Airports can be reached in two and three hours respectively. CEDA also notes Cullman and adjacent counties have a population of 500,000.

CEDA also lists the following as the county's larger employers:

Table 1: Major Employers in Cullman County

Cullman County Board of Education 1,225	Cullman Regional Medical Center 1,069
Wal-Mart Distribution 1,009	Wallace State Community College 550
Rehau 502	Topre America 465
McGriff Industries 385	Royal Technology 300
City of Cullman 284	Axsys Technologies 235
Yutaka Technology 150	Cash Acme (expansion underway)

[17] Alabama Cooperative Extension System, "About Cullman County," http://www.aces.edu/counties/Cullman/ (accessed December 1, 2011).

[18] A micropolitan is a rural county in which the largest city in that county does not exceed 50,000.

[19] Ron Starner, "Top Micropolitans of 2010: A Tar Heel Triumph," *Site Selection* 56, no. 2 (March 2011): 260-266.

Likewise, CEDA supplies a ten year history of manufacturing and distribution industry in Cullman County, highlighting the fact that new and expanding industries have proven to be nearly a billion dollar industry over the ten-year period ranging from 2000 to 2009.

Housing information is another helpful gauge of the community's economic prosperity. The household projection for Cullman County in 2011 is 33,609, with owner-occupied housing at 78.25 percent and an average value of $99,455. For the City of Cullman the 2011 households projection is 14,542 with owner-occupied housing at 59.56 percent and an average value of $122,156. The annual median real estate property taxes paid for housing units in the city of Cullman is 0.3 percent ($302).[20]

CEDA illustrates too the high priority investment in the community has been over the past five year. The construction of the $22 million Cullman Aquatics Center in 2009, a $5 million dollar expansion of the emergency Room at Cullman Regional Medical Center, and a $4.5 million expansion of the Department of Human Resources and County office building highlight the civic mindedness of Cullman residents. An additional $1.3 million fire station and $2 million police station further illustrate high expectations for excellence.

Together, these statistics, along with the aggressive recruiting work of CEDA, suggest that citizens of Cullman are not content with the status quo and are active in improving their quality of life. Ministry and outreach at St. John's, then, must also strive for such excellence. Likewise, the congregation must remain vigilant in understanding the dichotomy of the community's farm and city population. The developing concern with quality of life notwithstanding, Cullman is not without an underclass. The relatively

[20] According to recruiting materials provided by Cullman Economic Development Agency.

diverse economy signifies the need for awareness of diverse professions—both blue and white collar, as well as service and civic-oriented career persons. Because the larger community in which St. John's seeks to minister is home to both the wealthy and impoverished, the work of the church must take into account the varying needs of its members and locals still unreached by the gospel. It is important to note too that the current membership reflects primarily that progressive element in the community that maintains high expectations in all areas of life. Though there is a diverse economic constituency, the bulk of the congregation might be described as middle class or upper middle class who own their own homes, and is inclusive of doctors, lawyers, teachers, business owners, and many other white collar professionals. Often, the so-called blue collar workers have some college education and expect their children will pursue university degrees.

Education and Values: Schools and Religion

Cullman's self-perception as a progressive small town is tied closely with its values. Though the recent legalization of the sale of alcohol in the city of Cullman has raised concern among many of the more conservative members of the community, there have been no noticeably negative repercussions in the short term. Cullman is still able to boast that it is a peaceful community.

CEDA again is indicative of how Cullman sees itself, highlighting an "extremely low crime rate," a "thriving downtown," and a "family atmosphere." The aforementioned Aquatic Center, OHV (Off-Highway Vehicle) Park, Smith Lake Park, Sportsman Lake Park, numerous smaller parks, and recreation fields are indicative of the community's

interests and values. The Annual Bloomin' Fest at St. Bernard Prep School is one of the South's largest arts and crafts fairs and couples with Cullman's annual Oktoberfest as an opportunity for the community to celebrate its heritage and to provide a showcase for visitors.

Education in Cullman also helps to bolster the community's image. The city school system, according to CEDA, ranks third in Alabama. Cullman Primary School has received the Governor's "Exceeding the Challenge" award, West Elementary has been named a Blue Ribbon School of Excellence, and East Elementary earned the status of Alabama Banner School in 2010. The average ACT score of Cullman High School graduates is 23.2 (compared to a state average of 20.4) and $4.6 million dollars in scholarships were offered to 2010 graduates. The county school system (29 schools, including 7 high schools) has seen less success than the city system, but high school students meet the state average on the ACT and ninety-six percent of the teachers are considered "Highly Qualified" on state standards. Quality private institutions enhance the educational possibilities as well. Cullman Christian School provides an opportunity for a K-12 Christian education and Sacred Heart and St. Bernard together do the same within a Catholic framework, while St. Paul's Lutheran School offers courses through sixth grade. Finally, Wallace State Community College offers two year programs in academic, health, and technical fields, and Athens State University offers junior and senior level courses on the campus of WSCC, leading to a baccalaureate degree in a limited number of disciplines.

Cullman also boasts of a large number of churches. As stated above, John G. Cullman oversaw the founding of the city's first church, which exists today as St. John's.

In the heart of the Bible Belt, many other churches are present, representing the spectrum of Christian denominations and traditions. Describing Cullman as "The City of Churches," CEDA estimates there are approximately three hundred churches in Cullman County. Though dominated by Baptists, Cullman has a uniquely large Catholic population for a small town in the South. Besides a sizeable downtown facility that houses Sacred Heart School, there are Sacred Heart Convent and St. Bernard Abby (home of St. Bernard Prep School). Also of note is the Ave Maria Grotto, religious folk art created by Brother Joseph Zoettl in the first half of the twentieth century, and the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament, a monastery and church built by Mother Angelica of EWTN fame. These religious landmarks dot the landscape and continue to shape the community's perception and worldview. Though the vote to legalize the sale of alcohol has caused many to question the stability of the community's values, as noted, no noticeable shift in overall community lifestyle has surfaced.

Again, these factors are telling of the context in which St. John's is to present the gospel. For the most part, college degrees are still in a minority for most in the community, although an anecdotal observation of the congregation would suggest that most of its younger members have either graduated from college or have done some college work. Most, but not all, of the children and youth of the church attend the city schools, rather than county or private, and their parents have some expectation that they will seek a college degree. Just as the recent wet/dry issue was somewhat divisive for the community, the membership of St. John's reflects the divide, although St. John's would certainly be stereotyped as one of the "wet" churches in town. The biggest challenge regarding the larger religious context is church competition. With so many churches,

there is frequent movement of membership or "church hopping." If a member is dissatisfied, there are other options and many bring a competition-market mentality to choosing a church family. This remains an ongoing struggle for most congregations and St. John's must improve at educating its membership in knowing who they are in Christ and what that means regarding their commitment to their home church.

The World Around Us: Cullman in a Larger Context

Other cultural factors that influence Cullman and St. John's must be considered as well. In spite of the positive self-perception and promotion, Cullman, like any town, must deal with issues such as poverty, broken homes, addictions, and the like. Such concerns are universal and affect towns and cities, large and small. More broadly, however, are cultural influences of the twenty-first century that impact church and community life. Of these, our penchant for instantaneity, entertainment, and self-gratification dictate the mentality brought to the faith. Indeed, in a culture driven by "needs, wants, and feelings,"[21] and in the broader postmodern context characterized by the absence of a common metanarrative, pastors and churches face a daunting, if not unrelenting, task in their work to shape the minds and hearts of twenty-first century Christians.[22] These pressures, which frequently conflict with Christian mores and beliefs, make even more difficult the task of reaching people with the truth of the love and Lordship of Christ.

[21] Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 33.

[22] By postmodern this paper means, with Ray Anderson, that truth is "embedded in the narratives of the human community where there is no metanarrative that reconciles all narratives to a single, compelling moral truth." Ray Anderson, *An Emergent Theology for Emerging Churches* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 54.

Journalist Carl Honoré describes a widespread impatience in contemporary culture, labeling it a cult of speed, an "obsession with doing more and more in less and less time."[23] Lamenting these circumstances, he suggests that "a life of hurry can become superficial. When we rush, we skim the surface, and fail to make real connections with the world or other people."[24] In other words, churches and church leaders face the challenge of overcoming the assumed mentality that faster is better and of overcoming the expectation of instant gratification that permeates the mentality of contemporary America. This cultural conditioning for speed challenges the depth of understanding and relationships one hopes to gain as Christians.

Nicholas Carr, writing for *The Atlantic Monthly*, expresses similar concern, commenting on the addiction to Internet surfing. In an article entitled "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Carr broaches the question of how the Internet impacts our patterns of thinking. He muses:

> When the Net absorbs a medium, that medium is re-created in the Net's image. It injects the medium's content with hyperlinks, blinking ads, and other digital gewgaws, and it surrounds the content with the content of all the other media it has absorbed. A new e-mail message, for instance, may announce its arrival as we're glancing over the latest headlines at a newspaper's site. The result is to scatter our attention and diffuse our concentration.[25]

Churches battle short attention spans created by the words and images that inundate members daily. Collectively, these cultural realities of self absorption,

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[23] Carl Honoré, *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 4.

[24] Ibid., 9.

[25] Nicholas Carr, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" *The Atlantic* 301, no. 6 (July/August 2008), http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/200807/google (accessed February 3, 2012).

pluralism, speed, inattention, and a resulting superficiality make for a complex world in which St. John's is to train parishioners to think "Christianly" and live godly lives.

Evelyn Underhill, writing in the1930s, astutely stated the problem this way: "We mostly spend those [scattered] lives conjugating three verbs: to Want, to Have, and to Do… forgetting that none of these verbs have any ultimate significance, except so far as they are transcended by and included in, the fundamental verb, to Be: and that Being, not wanting, having and doing, is the essence of a spiritual life."[26] This notion of being lies at the heart not only of the spiritual life, but of Christian teaching and it is this notion that is threatened even in the lives of small town southerners in Cullman, Alabama. Overcoming this challenge is paramount for ministry in any context, and St. John's will do well to find ways to meet realistically members where they are. In other words, we must be aware of the fast paced, consumerist lifestyle of the early twenty-first century if we are to present faithfully the gospel of Jesus.

Conclusion

In sum, Cullman is a relatively small community, nestled in the rolling hills of north Alabama. Just outside the downtown business district and bordering the historic residential neighborhood sits St. John's, a historically German congregation founded by the nineteenth-century immigrants who settled in this Deep South state after the Civil War. Today, the larger community is made up almost wholly of Americans of European descent and is active commercially in both industrial and agricultural endeavors. Likewise, the residents of Cullman and Cullman County still have a basically religious

[26] Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1985), 20.

worldview, shaped by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Catholics and Protestants alike share the spiritual landscape, but it is a landscape challenged by affluence, competing churches, and a culture expecting instantaneous pleasure and quick results. Aside from the problems that currently plague much of America, residents maintain that Cullman is a uniquely quaint and quiet town and a great place for faith and raising families.

CHAPTER 2

ST. JOHN'S EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT CHURCH: IDENTITY CRISIS

St. John's is Cullman's oldest religious organization, celebrating its rich history, while also seeking to minister in the name of the Lord Jesus to contemporary needs. At just over 135 years of age, St. John's is old enough to have undergone considerable changes and yet young enough to have members with ties to the early character of the congregation. Now in the twenty-first century and largely removed from its German origins, St. John's is an anomaly in a larger religious community dominated by the Baptist tradition. Newcomers to St. John's, and often long-term members as well, have difficulty grasping the identity of the church. Many members, new and old, need clarification not only of their identity in Christ but especially of the church's identity.

Belonging to the Evangelical Association of Reformed and Congregational Christian Churches (hereafter EARCC), St. John's, like many evangelical churches, practices congregational polity and affirms the authority of Scripture for Christian faith and life. The congregation, however, is also sacrament celebrating and ecumenically minded in the context of its Reformation and liturgical heritage. Likewise, there is an

openness to implement ancient and traditional practices in contemporary ways. St. John's, understanding the human need for grace, welcomes those seeking to deepen their relationship with the Lord regardless of their past. A spiritual home for many community leaders, St. John's has much talent to be harnessed for Kingdom work. While the membership of St. John's hails from all parts of the community, they tend to be middle to upper-middle class. Several serve in the community in service professions like education and many more serve in local civic organizations. This chapter, then, explores these attributes in hope of laying a foundation from which St. John's can recover a stronger sense of its historic and theological identity and thereby charting a positive course for its future.

German Ethnic Origins: A Community Church

German churches of the historic evangelical tradition in the deep South are an anomaly, but this is exactly what St. John's is. Founded in 1874 by newly arrived German immigrants, St. John's has served its community faithfully for well over one-hundred years. A variety of ecclesial affiliations further reflect the uniqueness of St. John's. Most of the congregation, however, is simply unaware of or confused by their history and heritage. Nonetheless, it is this very background that provides the foundation for a unique mission in the region.

Founding Motivations: A German Church in a New Land

When Johann Gottfried Cullman and his band of German settlers arrived in north Alabama in the 1870s, they brought with them a host of presuppositions about life, including religious views shaped by the aforementioned Rationalism and Pietism.

Although Cullman himself appears not to have been a particularly religious man, he tended to the spiritual concerns of the people he recruited, becoming a charter member of St. John's, established in May of 1874 as First Evangelical Protestant Church. The congregation had no formal denominational ties at its founding but clung tenaciously to its German ethnic heritage, recruiting German pastors to minister to the needs of Germans and German-Americans. Indeed, the German language was common in worship until 1932 when it began to cause a significant drop in attendance. At that time German services were limited to twice monthly, but not until 1941 were all German-language services discontinued.

The original constitution of St. John's clarifies the desire of the early settlers of Cullman and founders of the church to maintain their German heritage. Article 1, section 2 reads, "We cling to the symbols of the church of our old German fathers and defend the protestant faith and freedom of mind. We also believe in our salvation through Christ and recognize the Holy Scripture as the common rule and guide of our faith and life." As noted, the forces that led to the settling of Cullman and founding of St. John's were not unlike those that led other Germans to immigrate to the United States in the nineteenth century. Championing a Protestant faith and the life of the mind, the sentiments of these settlers in the South typified the concerns of nineteenth-century German immigrants.

Ecclesiastical Affiliations: Ethnicity and the Wider Church

These German settlers who came to Cullman brought with them their Christian heritage and sought to establish a place of worship in their new home, making St. John's Cullman's oldest church. That body initially adopted the label First Evangelical

Protestant Church, "a name," reads the original constitution, "that shall never be changed."[1] Cullman was the lone German community in the region, and so with a dearth of German clergymen in the area, St. John's sought German pastors through various denominational agencies, paying dues to those organizations without necessarily pursuing formal ties.

Eventually the church joined the Evangelical Synod of North America, which would later merge with German Reformed Christians to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church in America. This ethnic enclave of churches would ultimately become part of the United Church of Christ (hereafter UCC). During the 1880s the church's name was changed to St. John's, before later becoming St. John's United Church of Christ. Uncomfortable with the congregation's more conservative theological views, the UCC dismissed St. John's from the denomination in the mid-1990s. Currently the church has no formal denominational ties but belongs to the EARCC, an association of churches of similar background and heritage. Since removal from the UCC, the congregation has gone by the name St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church, a name full of historical and theological implications but implications rarely grasped by even the most astute members.

Historical Trends: Seasons of Growth, Renewal, and Decline

Since its formation as an ethnic German congregation, St. John's has experienced seasons of significant growth and decline. Demographic changes, including the Americanization of immigrant families, as well as fluctuations in membership, have led

[1] *Constitution of St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church* (Cullman, AL: St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church, no date appears in the translated version of the remaining manuscript).

to a lack of knowledge about the history and heritage of St. John's and, thusly, to the congregation's quandary regarding its identity. These problems have stemmed, at least partially, from several significant and unfortunate divisions over the course of its history, the most recent being roughly twenty years ago. Since that time, the congregation has grown to become a place where people gather to find a deeper, more genuine walk with Christ. Though the church has rebounded from these episodes, there remains a fear in some of what can (if not inevitably will) happen again. A brief look at those divisions follows.

At least four schisms in the history of St. John's are noteworthy. The first took place 1885 when Reverend F. Englebert arrived in Cullman as a pastoral candidate. Several years prior (1880) the church expressed an interest in affiliating with the General Synod Lutheran Church, though records indicate that both Evangelical Lutheran and Evangelical Protestant Church were used in the congregation's nomenclature. Englebert came to Cullman as a devotee to the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. The congregation promptly denied his candidacy, presumably because of his synodical allegiance, but Englebert stayed in Cullman and founded St. Paul's Lutheran Church, attracting several members from St. John's to his cause. It was actually a year later in 1886, perhaps in response to the founding of St. Paul's, that the congregation adopted the name St. John's after the apostle of the New Testament.

St. John's Lutheran ties would continue well into the twentieth century. In 1919 the congregation called Haus Henning to serve as pastor. Henning is notable for beginning to introduce English into the morning services. The newly arrived minister also sought to lead St. John's into a Lutheran synod the congregation as a whole did not wish

to join. While away in 1921, Henning and his wife attended a Jack Dempsey fight, leading to a discrepancy in church finances. Accusations were made that Henning spent church funds on his family vacation while supposedly attending a church-related conference. Although it seems Henning was very popular with the younger and newer members, his leadership proved too tumultuous to lead the congregation as a whole, and church leaders asked Henning to resign in January of 1922. Like Englebert before him, Henning decided to remain in Cullman and he led a number away from St. John's and founded Christ English Lutheran Church.[2]

Though it would appear that St. John's was indeed becoming a Lutheran church, the lack of reception of Englebert's and Henning's leadership hints that the congregation might have leaned toward Lutheranism more because of its connections with their German ethnic founding rather than a strong creedal conviction. For instance, in 1904 Reverend W.H. Aufderhaar came as pastor and served until 1907. Aufderhaar was not a Lutheran but belonged to the German Evangelical Synod of North America. Furthermore, Aufderhaar returned to Cullman for a second stint as pastor of St. John's after Henning's dismissal. Under Aufderhaar's capable leadership, St. John's completed the sanctuary still occupied to this day and led the congregation to formally join the more ecumenically minded Evangelical Synod sometime around 1926. These moves proved most influential, establishing St. John's connection to the wider church for the next seventy years and providing the congregation with a worship facility used into the twenty-first century.

[2] Curiously, St. John's, St. Paul's (Missouri Synod), and Christ English Lutheran (now Christ Lutheran and a member of the ELCA) each sit on adjacent blocks. The 2011 tornadoes destroyed completely Christ Lutheran's facilities and the small congregation intends to rebuild.

The German pulse of the congregation remained strong well into the twentieth century and it was not until 1968 that St. John's called its first non-German pastor. In July of that year the congregation installed George Fidler as senior pastor, marking a long pastorate to renew a then-declining church. Two more divisions amongst congregants, however, marred Fiddler's tenure at St. John's. Accusations of dishonesty, deceit, and duplicitous leadership led to an exodus of a large number of members in 1989 and the founding of Independent Christian Church (today New Life Christian Church). The church quickly rebounded, however, before similar accusations were again made and another group departed in1992 to form Christ Covenant Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church of America). The latter controversy proved too detrimental for Fidler to continue leading the congregation and he resigned later in that year.

After a brief interim period, the now fragmented and despondent congregation called the Reverend Robert Kurtz as Senior Pastor in 1993. Installed in 1994, he served the congregation in that capacity until June 2012. Because of Kurtz's leadership St. John's has enjoyed stability, a rehabilitated reputation in the community, a robust congregational life, numerical growth, and has emerged as one of the stronger congregations in Cullman. Likewise, under his leadership the congregation experienced the addition of a preschool, and three building projects took place, including a $5 million expansion completed at the end of 2010.

Changing Cultural Influences: A German Church in the Deep South

St. John's ethnic and theological heritage are unique for Alabama, and the South in general, and the church's storied history further complicates its perception among

members and nonmembers alike. In the early twenty-first century, however, the issue of identity addressed in this paper is a problem likely faced by most congregations from a variety of backgrounds. It is probable that many churches in America have little knowledge of their congregational history or theological heritage, let alone a basic understanding of the larger Christian tradition. Void of historical knowledge as we are, American Christians, like the culture at large, are content to be in the present, unaware of the historical and ideological influences, both good and bad, that have shaped us and our congregations.

We should not, however, be dismissive of the empowering lessons to be learned from history and heritage, the notion taken up in this project through the practice of pilgrimage. For churches to discover who God has called them to be, congregations must be familiar with what he has done and said through them in the past. Although little understood, St. John's uniqueness, re-envisioned for the twenty-first century, will prove to be the key for the congregation's future.

St. John's Today: A Church in Transition

St. John's is not the same church it was in 1874. Though the past provides a foundation for and still influences the congregation, over one-hundred years of ethnic and cultural shifts have changed St. John's. Similarly, recent events continue to shape the congregation and mold the ministries for a new day. Pastors, buildings, and membership have influenced the character and personality of St. John's. The transformation continues during an on-going period of transition.

Building Projects: Looking to the Future

The more immediate past is highly indicative of St. John's present context too. After continued growth under Kurtz's leadership, the congregation called Reverend Steve Wood as Minister of Christian Education in the summer of 2003. That fall the church invited me to serve the congregation on a part-time basis, before formally calling me as Minister of Parish Life in the fall of 2004. These additions were indicative of larger needs, however, and in 2006 the congregation formally began exploring the possibility of increasing the size of the physical plant to expand ministry possibilities.

The process that began in 2006 was not an easy journey for St. John's. Prior to initiating the building project the church was averaging well over six-hundred people in attendance and the budget had grown to $1.3 million. The church also retained some debt at the outset of the venture, which included the purchase and renovation of the "Ruehl Building," adjacent to the church's existing facilities, renovation of low-income apartments located behind the church, the purchase and renovation of property five blocks from the church for the creation of Little Lambs Preschool, and several other remodeling projects within the existing church complex. If the church were to expand its ministry opportunities, the options available to it were to move, purchase other properties adjacent to St. John's, or to tear down the apartments, freeing the remainder of the block. Because the members of St. John's were and are emotionally attached to the sanctuary and appreciate the downtown site, located at the edge of the business district and historic homes district, members were not interested in moving locations. Simply put, such a move would have caused incredible dissension and garnered little support. Adjacent properties were deemed too expensive and/or the buildings on them unsuitable for

ministry needs. Finally, because the apartments had fallen again into disrepair, the chosen solution was to demolish the complex and expand on the remaining three-quarters of the block. This was the easy and most obvious course of action.

Unfortunately, some of the congregation was not supportive of expansion in any form. On the one hand, many were uncomfortable with the recent growth which was significantly reshaping church life. On the other hand, there was doubt among those who were concerned about the then current debt and felt the church was acting too hastily, believing that numbers, both budgetary and attendance, were likely to fluctuate. Two other decisions highlight the difficulty of the process. First was the building itself. Once the decision was made to move forward, a design-construction team was chosen based on their reputation for working with growing churches. Unfortunately, their work centered almost exclusively on churches desiring to move and build new sanctuaries in highly visible and easily accessible locations. Indeed, this firm recommended St. John's build a new sanctuary, a suggestion which met with great resistance from a majority of the congregation and even some of the pastoral staff. After the decision was made not to pursue a sanctuary, the company proved incredibly difficult to work with as they showed little to no understanding of the history, heritage, and personality of the St. John's family. After many months of working toward a new future, plans had to be scrapped and the church had to begin again with a new architect in 2008.

Not only were there obstacles to the design of the structure itself, but fundraising proved an equally challenging prospect, and the capital campaign begun in 2007 reflects the second difficulty of the congregation's planned expansion. The operating philosophy of the Senior Pastor was that the Holy Spirit will lead members to give generously when

occasions arise. Accordingly, sermons on giving and tithing were virtually nonexistent, nor had there been any precedent for implementing a serious strategy for congregational giving. To move forward with such an expansive project, however, all agreed a stewardship campaign was necessary. Because giving had been highlighted only haphazardly in the preaching and teaching of the previous fifteen years, there was significant resistance to it and more mistrust resulted from attempts to acquire funds for the project. Although fundraising projects earned $2.1 million in pledges and "in-kind" gifts, many ultimately viewed the total as disappointing when compared to what the congregation was capable of raising.

In short, the congregation did not share a common vision or desire for the plans many felt were thrust upon them. Though only some were opposed, many were indifferent, and only a minority was truly excited about the project. Indeed, frustrations increased incrementally throughout the project and the congregation witnessed a decline in attendance, averaging just over 470 in worship in 2010. Since the buildings were completed in the fall of 2010, however, a positive spirit has begun to return to the congregation, while giving has remained relatively steady. The budget for the year 2011 remained at $1.3 million, and giving has remained relatively steady in spite of the attendance drop. Such fluctuations in membership and ongoing concern for the debt have contributed to an uncertainty about the future of St. John's, and an underlying anxiety arguably still haunts congregational life despite the renewed spirit of the congregation.

Leadership: Recent and Future Changes

If building projects were not enough to test the faith of the faithful, members of St. John's have also faced transitions in the pastoral staff. When the project began, many recognized that both the Senior Pastor and Music Minister were aging clergymen whose days of full-time ministry were drawing to a close. Members subtly and overtly asked questions about their ability to continue indefinitely. In short, members began asking when they would retire and some expressed a desire that they do so sooner rather than later. The Reverend Jim Walker had arrived as minister of music at St. John's in 1990 just prior to the departure of Reverend Fidler and the second division under the his tenure. Walker's steadying presence and wisdom from many years in ministry were paramount for the congregation as it weathered the turmoil that embroiled St. John's during the early 1990s. However, at seventy years of age when the building project began, most recognized that the church would soon be looking to fill this vital position. Walker did retire in August 2010 and Reverend Adam King now serves as Minister of Music.

Similarly, Reverend Bob Kurtz was in his mid-60s when the project began, and members began raising questions about his retirement at the same time that Walker retired, even though he had successfully led the congregation for well over ten years. To that point, Kurtz's most important role at St. John's had been as healer. Arriving in the waning months of 1993, he inherited a most tumultuous situation. He quickly recognized, however, the significance of St. John's for the community, and through his optimism and congenial spirit, he brought renewal to an aching and ailing congregation. Throughout the project, though, organizational direction was widely questioned, if only quietly and

informally. After weathering a difficult season of expansion, he served as Senior Pastor through June 2012. This departure, of course, has raised another set of challenges and the congregation anxiously awaits the arrival of a formally called Senior Pastor.

If these challenges were not enough to try the congregation, youth ministry signified yet another difficulty. After eight years on staff, the youth minister, Brian Ferguson departed St. John's during the building project. The congregation went almost a full year without an individual in the position, while several parents and the ministerial staff continued working with the youth. Ben Karwoski arrived in January of 2011 to begin serving as youth minister. In the previous eight years, then, two pastors have departed from St. John's and four new ministers have been called, with most influential change to come in the near future as the congregation prepares to call new senior leadership.

Membership: Fluctuations and Maturity

That St. John's should deal with a spirit of anxiety is not surprising under the circumstances. Rapid growth can cause great discomfort for any congregation, particularly one comfortable with its routine. Add to that a massive building project, significant shifts in leadership, and forthcoming shifts in leadership, and it is easy to understand that St. John's is a church simultaneously confident and unsure. Though members often judge church life based on their worship experience, it is important to note that recent transitions have challenged the congregation's life together, causing a spirit of discontent in some and even a further decline in attendance. As a community, however, such experiences are important to share, and these have not been insignificant

experiences. Though attendance and spirit alike have not gone unscathed in this process, there remains the sure hope that these experiences have tested the congregation and therefore strengthened it for the future. (At the writing of this paper, a move is being made to experiment with worship in the new facility and there has been a slight rise in attendance.)

St. John's Tomorrow: A Church Ready for the Future

St. John's is an active congregation that has only begun to tap into its full potential. Worship is the central function of the congregation and is perhaps its greatest strength. A welcoming environment serves as an entry point into congregational life for followers and would-be followers of Christ. Opportunities for discipleship, however show promise but can still be strengthened for greater effectiveness. In spite of challenging transitions, St. John's is poised for a hopeful future.

Ministering to the Community: Current Activities

In spite of recent frustrations and uncertainty about the future, St. John's has remained an active body. Even as it recovers from these trials, St. John's celebrates its role as the oldest church in the community, champions its congregational polity, affirms the authority of Scripture for Christian faith and practice, and, therefore, has a solid foundation for what lies ahead. Without offering a detailed explanation of each ministry and activity, the following list provides an indicative overview of congregational life and ministries over the past seven years:

Table 2: Ministry Activities at St. John's

Acolytes: Acolyte Director(s)	Prayer Team
Buildings and Grounds: Apartments, Sanctuary, Fellowship Hall, Education Building, Parsonage, Ruehl Building, Little Lambs School	Sassy Sages: Meals, Monthly Trips
Christian Awareness	Searchers: Greeters/Outreach
Christian Education: Sunday School, Children's Ministry, Confirmation, Nursery, Moms and More, Small Groups (Women's and Men's), Wednesday Activities (child and adult)	Technical Ministry: Sound, Recording, Website
HOME: Elderly Care, Meal Delivery, Meal Ministry, Card Ministry, Work Crews (physical needs)	Ushers
Little Lamb's School	Van Ministry
Men's Fellowship: Breakfast (weekly), Golf Tournament, Outings	Women's Fellowship: Monthly Meetings, Oktoberfest, Thanksgiving Meal
Missions and Outreach: Foreign Mission Outreach, Mission Fundraising, Local Outreach and Evangelism, Local Benevolence, Gulf Coast Relief	Women's Guild: Monthly Meetings, Fundraisers
Music Ministry: Adult Choir, Youth and Children's Choirs, Adult Handbells, Children's Handbells, Performing/Fine Arts Center, Youth Praise Band	Youth Ministry: Meetings (twice weekly), Fellowship, Outreaches, Youth Leadership Training
New Life and Young Adults: Wednesday Classes, Outings, Outreaches, Tuesday Night Special	

Special Lent and Advent services on Wednesday afternoons and evenings could be added to this list, as well as fundraising activities for short-term missions. Recently, St. John's has implemented a Stephen Ministry, commissioning three Stephen Ministers in October, 2012. The preceding list and additions suggests a wide array of possibilities in a number of ministry areas, but the reality is Sunday mornings and Wednesday evenings receive the bulk of the congregation's energies. Many of the ministries listed are defunct in practice, while others pertain to only a minority of congregants. Some of these areas reflect great success while others have indicated we still have much room for improvement. In sum,

St. John's has been inconsistent in discipleship, service, and in relevantly communicating the gospel, while yet showing potential for improvement in each area.

What People Say: Congregational Perceptions and Realities

In this ministry context, the congregation as a whole can be described as ecumenically minded in the context of its Reformation heritage (discussed further in Chapter 4), as a body of believers who understand the human need for grace, and as welcoming to all, regardless of past, who seek to deepen their relationship with the Lord. Similarly, several community leaders call St John's their spiritual home. Much of the membership consists of middle to upper-middle class residents, many of whom serve in the community as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and are active in the city's several civic groups.

The general perception of the membership is that St. John's is a strong church, but with uncertainties about the future still looming, there is some concern about how strong the church is in actuality. Broadly, most would consider the preaching and worship/music to be strong. A very significant minority, however, would prefer the preaching to be more teaching oriented or at least more practical. Likewise, a significant number of younger adults are anxious for a contemporary worship experience, which the congregation has been experimenting with throughout 2012. Though most view their church favorably, in these two respects there is and has been growing dissatisfaction and discontent. Further reflection on perceptions and realities might be better viewed through the lens of a more formal critique, and so an analysis of strengths and weaknesses follows.

Building Blocks: Strengths and Weaknesses of St. John's

St. John's actively champions its Reformation heritage, or, more accurately stated, the senior leadership has proactively proclaimed the Reformation principles of *Sola Gratia*, *Sole Fide*, and *Sola Scriptura* through preaching and teaching. Most at St. John's do not question the Bible as the center of Christian life and faith, and so it is appropriate to expand on what that means for St. John's and to offer a basic critique of the congregation's spirituality based on that principle.

Although St. John's as a congregation affirms the primacy of Scripture for Christian faith, and would even herald it as a fundamental devotional tool all should engage, the membership of St. John's would probably rate as typical to weak in terms of the number of people who proactively immerse themselves in God's word. Though affirming Paul's assessment that "all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tm 3:16-17), not all in the church spend significant time in devotional reflection outside of worship services and Bible study courses offered at church facilities. To be sure, there are also many who do actively read the Bible away from the church, some of whom regard the act to be highly personal and do not draw attention to their studies, while another portion of the congregation actively studies and feels that it should be shared publicly, with believers and nonbelievers, in positive and encouraging ways.

The church as an organization, though, does provide numerous opportunities to interact with Scripture through worship and Bible study. Sunday morning worship centers around the proclamation of the Word, while Wednesday afternoon and evening services

provide time for quiet reflection seasonally during Advent and Lent. Sunday school attracts approximately twenty percent of our active adults. Wednesday evening classes and small groups typically reach fifty to one hundred adults, depending on the season of the year and course offerings, but several of these would be individuals who also attend Sunday morning classes. It should be noted that while some of these are studies of biblical books, topical or devotional studies are also common. In each case, however, the Bible is typically the foundational principle for these works.

Besides these general remarks about the Bible at St. John's is how well our practices actually reflect the call of those Scriptures. St. John's ecumenical outlook reflects two of the Jesus's most profound teachings. Most explicitly is Jesus's prayer for unity in John 17:20-23:

> My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

Here, Jesus pleads with the Father for a spirit of harmony among his followers, knowing that the unity of believers will send a message to all who hear the Good News. Avoiding divisive controversy over perceived secondary concerns and insisting on theological majors like the centrality of Scripture and teachings found in the Apostles' Creed allows St. John's to work toward the unity Jesus hoped for. (We must sadly note based on the congregation's history, however, it is a theological conviction often not born out in the lived-life of the membership.)

Less doctrinally concerned but important in the teachings of Jesus's is an openness to those who are lost and hurting. St. John's embraces those in spiritual need in accord with Jesus's concern for the spiritually depleted, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Mt 11:28-30). Regardless of a person's past experiences, St. John's actively opens itself to individuals at whatever stage of spiritual formation they find themselves in and allows them to progress at their own pace.

Although St. John's succeeds in these areas, it is not without some compromise. Though championing an ecumenical spirit, the congregation is not well versed in theology itself and is not as Scripture savvy as one might hope. The shortcoming to the congregation's openness is the minimal expectation from the membership in way of ethical behavior and biblical and theological knowledge.

Reflecting on God's expectations for the Israelites, Moses admonishes the people to instruct their children, saying, "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates, so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth" (Dt 11:19-21). Indeed, the future of God's people hinged on instruction of the young.

The New Testament authors felt the same urgency as Moses to pass the faith on to children. In the Gospel Jesus urges the children to come to him (Mt 19, Mk 10, Lk 18), while Paul writes explicitly to the fathers in the church at Ephesus not to "exasperate

your children" but to "instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord" (Eph 6:4). His remarks to Timothy provide a more telling, personal testimony. The Apostle encourages his protégé, writing, "But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tm 3:14-15). Here is a specific example, if only a second-hand account, of child training in action and how important it is for the church.

St. John's success at following the biblical mandate of training children in the faith gets mixed reviews. There is a very active children's program and a robust pre school ministry. This training culminates in sixth grade Confirmation, which includes a study of the Scriptures and the Heidelberg Catechism. The commitment to training children continues with the presence of a full-time Director of Youth Ministries. Nonetheless, the over-committed and easily-distracted culture we live in is a difficult obstacle to overcome. In this respect many of our youth and children are not active after confirmation. Historically speaking, St. John's simply suffers from similar challenges of the past. John Baltzer once commented, "We frequently hear complaints about what is happening to our young people after confirmation—how frivolous they are, often defiant of restraint, paying little heed to religion."[3] The basic struggles of the church remains and the same could be said of many of those who are confirmed at St. John's. Nonetheless, a

[3] John Baltzer, *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church*, ed. Lowell Zuck (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), 196.

commitment to children and youth remains tangible, as remains constant the approach to ministry that assumes the Holy Spirit will draw those in need of ministry.

Because an explicit formula for worship is not laid out in Scripture, it is a difficult topic to critique. It will suffice to point out that the constitution of St. John's takes it cues from 1 Corinthians 14:40 and states, "everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way." This, for St. John's, applies to worship as well. The constitution endows the Senior Pastor with authority over worship—its planning and implementation.

It might be added that if Jesus's words about worshiping in Spirit and in truth refer to ecstatic experiences, St. John's certainly falls short. The historical influence of good German orderliness has created an environment that tends to shy away from such overt expressions at this point in the church's life. If the words speak more generally about worshiping everywhere and at all times, then St. John's is in line with Scripture, championing at least in theory the call to worship as an entire way of life and not just a Sunday morning event.

Finally, as noted above, the Word is central to life at St. John's. God-breathed Scripture takes center stage in worship at St. John's through weekly preaching and various teaching opportunities. On most Sundays, two Scriptures are shared, the first being read either from the lectern or read responsively by the congregation and a leader. This first reading is typically followed by the Gloria, praising God for the gift of his Word. The second reading comes prior to, or as a part of, the sermon and is expounded upon accordingly.

Likewise, people who find themselves at St. John's love Cullman and are glad to call it home. Most members can be classified as upper-middle class and well over 99

percent White. The busy pace of life is one of the greatest pressures faced at St. John's—cultural demands, as well as self-imposed activities, seem to drive the membership more than does a personal vision of enjoying our Creator and his creation (see Introduction and Chapter 1). Another force that seduces us is the subtlety of an anything goes culture that exhibits little discipline and concern for the deeper needs of people. Inherent to Southern culture is a Bible Belt mentality that, ironically, also stands in the way of faith at times. Religious language is so common and used so indiscriminately that genuine critical and personal needs are often neglected.

Within the church, the greatest pleasures St. John's enjoys are worship and fellowship. Congregants love coming together in the sanctuary, particularly if just coming from time around the dinner table in the fellowship hall. The warmth of worship and fellowship are a great attraction for most. Outside of the explicitly church realm, the other great pleasure of many of our people is our other god: football. Auburn, Alabama, and SEC fanaticism abounds (as discussed in the Introduction).

A deep need of the congregation is to establish a clear vision of life's purpose in which members submit everything to the lordship of Christ and see all of life as the realm in which God works. In one sense, an awareness of God's presence and works of grace and mercy in everyday life is needed to growing in fellowship with him. A corollary to this is the need to better understand how to serve God in vocations, hobbies, and daily routines (and to understand and articulate how this might already be happening).

Likewise, a greater vulnerability and honesty is still needed to move to deeper places. Lastly, there are many with specific needs (e.g. divorce, alcoholism, and the like) that need both love and care, while also needing to understand humanity's problems are

frequently the fruit of personal choices and that daily discipline and commitment are fundamental to Jesus's call on members' lives.

An immediate atmosphere which has been plagued by insecurities, indecision, and unclear vision planning has heightened the collective congregational needs. This stems from several years of wrestling with the future of St. John's solely in terms of the building project. As noted, a positive outlook is returning in the aftermath of a season plagued with spiritual and emotional frustration. Signs of rejuvenation are indeed emerging again in the lives of several members and their fervor is showing potential for contagion, particularly as a newly formed Tuesday night young adult ministry seems to be strengthening. For many in our congregation, a time of self-examination is in order to see that God is present (and has been present) in spite of aggravating circumstances. This applies, of course, not only to the dissatisfaction within the congregation and difficult the life circumstances of several individuals, but also to ongoing concerns over leadership transitions.

Conclusion

Since its creation as an ethnic German congregation, St. John's has experienced significant shifts in membership, which has lead to confusion about the theological identity of the congregation. Multiple name changes and various ecclesial affiliations throughout its history have heightened the problem. The current context might be described as one in which the membership, though endeared to their church family, has little understanding of the theological background or of the tradition of the larger community. Indeed, it would not be an overstatement to suggest that the members of St.

John's lack any meaningful concept of their historical and theological heritage. This deficient understanding reflects a more significant problem for the congregation, namely a lack of identity in relation not only to itself but also the larger Body of Christ. In simpler terms, members of St. John's are not versed in the theological history of the congregation and are unable to articulate who they are as a congregation to community members. The church's location in the Bible Belt, a region religiously dominated by Southern Baptists, and to a lesser degree Methodists, Churches of Christ, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Pentecostals, only compounds the problem. In other words, German ethnic congregations of the Evangelical and/or the Reformed tradition, such as St. John's, are simply not on the geographical or theological radar of the southern populace. Although the complexities of the congregations tradition may be more than most members are able to digest, some of the larger themes are important and communicable for a better understanding of our calling as a congregation. Again, this understanding will prove paramount as the congregation prepares for the future and the call of a new Senior Pastor.

PART TWO

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

CHAPTER 3

MODERN AND POSTMODERN CONSIDERATIONS: A THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Much has been said, both positively and negatively, about pilgrimage. While some decry the practice, classifying it as an attempt at works righteousness or claiming it unnecessary in light of God's ubiquitous presence, others find the journey to places where God has uniquely made himself known to be an illuminating experience, deepening the faith of the pilgrim. If pilgrimage is to be a helpful practice for St. John's, it is important to understand how it might be so. This chapter provides a review of the literature relevant to this project. Writings pertinent to the regional and cultural context, as well as works engaging pilgrimage as metaphor and/or spiritual practice, will be examined.

The Historical Context of Cullman, Alabama: Margaret Jean Jones's *Combing Cullman County* and *Cullman County across the Years*

What is particularly pertinent about this project is that the discipline of pilgrimage might be practiced in any community of believers seeking to learn more about their identity and calling or by any individual seeking to deepen his or her own faith and sense

of identity. Because this project aims to illustrate that pilgrimage will prove a useful discipline specifically for the membership of St. John's, it is appropriate to begin a review of the resources with those pertaining specifically to the immediate context of the congregation, that is to say, the community of Cullman itself. Although no formally published scholarly works about Cullman's history exist, local historian Margaret Jean Jones did much work regarding the community's settlement and growth, including evaluation of statistical data, historical assessment, and engaging the personalities that shaped the community. In spite of being physically paralyzed, her heroic diligence resulted in two key works, *Combing Cullman County* and *Cullman County across the Years*, each using formal documentation such as newspapers, journals, etc. where available, as well as oral histories and traditions held in memory by community residents.

Those interested in Cullman, north Alabama, and in rural histories in general will find Jones's work interesting and delightful. Those seeking a formal or critical treatment, matching the standards of published scholarly works, will find her histories lacking. Jones herself confesses, "The author fully realizes that due in large part to a lack of verifiable facts, a complete history can never be written."[1] Still, Jones's work is helpful local history and would likely serve as the foundation for any attempts at rigorous scholarly investigation, not only for research into the region but also for those studying German immigration and its cultural impact on the United States.

Jones's purpose in both works is to provide a record of the founding and development of the communities that make up Cullman County. Because her love for the

[1] Margaret Jean Jones, *Cullman County across the Years* (Cullman, AL: Modernistic Printers, 1975), xi.

communities she writes about is obvious, her work might sometimes border on hagiography. Jones does, nonetheless, engage the relevant and necessary source material available, including local and state newspapers. Since little else has been written about Cullman, she bases much of her work on oral remembrances, gathered via interviews with long-time residents. In this respect, Jones provides an invaluable service for Cullman County, compiling data in a meaningful composition and telling the story of the European pioneers and immigrants who settled this land either in hopes of eking out an existence or creating a brighter future for themselves and their families.

Though the Germans who arrived in 1873 were not the first settlers in area, Jones informs us, they quickly took center stage, putting the young city of Cullman on the map in Alabama. Fittingly, she places this story at the forefront of *Combing Cullman County*, before turning to the story of outlying communities. *Cullman Country across the Years*, on the other hand, is less a unified narrative than it is a collection of stories, anecdotes, and records about Cullman County arranged according to topic. Chapters range from the establishment of hospitals to schools, stories about mayors and letters from early settlers, and saloons and agriculture.

For this project Jones is helpful solely in terms of establishing the history of the community and the narrative of which St. John's is a part. Though the story she tells is admittedly incomplete, Jones does provide a working framework from which to begin a helpful analysis of the community in which St. John's seeks to minister. Beyond this understandable weakness, Jones's work lacks a meaningful treatment of the German background of Cullman and other nineteenth century Germans. She provides only passing

remarks about Germany and Colonel Cullman's involvement in the Revolution of 1848 and subsequent rebellions against the national government. Given the scope and purpose of her work, however, these shortcomings are understandable. Similarly, a lack of reliable sources about Cullman himself is an issue any author would have to grapple with. Still, for understanding how Cullman has been shaped by a German heritage, more analysis would be helpful, especially in terms of terms of the variety of cultural factors shaping nineteenth century German culture.

In short, Jones's work is greatly appreciable in light of the lack of other sources. That she has done much to compile oral histories and primary sources into a unified story makes her research laudable. In terms of this project, her work has been invaluable and has proved more than adequate in establishing a context for the on-going work of St. John's.

Pilgrimage as Spiritual Practice for the Postmodern Era: Leonard Sweet's *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First-Century Passion for the 21st Century World*

With the relevant historical and regional context established, the larger contemporary context in which Cullman and St. John's exist can be discussed. Although Cullman is a small town set in rural north Alabama, the town is not immune from larger cultural trends. The advent of the digital age and its related communication technologies means information and ideas can be shared in a matter of seconds. Hence, change and potential for immediate cultural impact within a community for good or ill is ever present. In other words, regardless of one's geographical location, current fashions in any realm of existence are immediately accessible via the internet. Similarly, there is little

limit to the voices that can be heard, creating an environment in which challenges to traditional sources of authority are common.

Contributing to this current climate and similarly being shaped by these changes in technology is the notion of the decay of the modern worldview and the ascendancy of the Postmodern. This Postmodern world is the world in which St. John's exists and must understand to faithfully fulfill its mission. Leonard Sweet, in his work, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First-Century Passion for the 21st Century World*, examines what these current trends mean for Christians today. His "EPIC" analysis of the culture provides a helpful starting point for Christian churches to engage citizens of the twenty-first century in a meaningful way.

In Sweet's analysis a Postmodern way of being can be characterized as experiential, participatory, image-based, and communal (thus, EPIC).[2] In the introduction he locates what he deems the two fundamental questions in life: Do you know who you are? And, do you know where you are?[3] Inherent in the former question is the metaphorical comparison of the Christian as pilgrim, an analogy (and practice) fundamental to this project. In the context of the latter question, Sweet lays out the cultural landscape in which the church must fulfill its mission, and therein lies the primary purpose behind his book. In four successive chapters, the author elaborates on this "EPIC" culture.

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[2] Leonard Sweet, *Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2000), xx-xxi.

[3] Ibid., 1-2.

In relation to the practice of pilgrimage, chapter one is most telling. Distinguishing between moderns and Postmoderns, Sweet writes, "Moderns want to figure out what life's about. Postmoderns want to experience what life is, especially experience life for themselves … Postmoderns don't want their information straight. They want it laced with experience."[4] He cites tourism as prime evidence of this, presenting the following tourism numbers as indicative of the desire for experience: $3.2 billion in industry investments a day and $1.9 trillion spent annually on travel.[5] This analysis is particularly important for the members of St. John's, a people seeking to discover who they are as Christians both individually and collectively as a body. Pilgrimage, as an experience-driven practice, becomes fundamental for Postmoderns to discern their identity.

Akin to the desire for experience, a participatory life is fundamental to Postmoderns. Here Sweet suggests, "Postmoderns are thinking and living within an interdependent, interactive ethos. They perceive, comprehend, and interact with the world as much as participants as observers."[6] Inherit in this participation is a creative drive and a longing for ownership. Sweet later muses, "Postmoderns are not simply going to transmit the tradition or the culture they've been taught. They won't take it unless they can transform it and customize it."[7] Accordingly, this applies to religion as well. Through experience, the faith can become personal and one's own. In this respect, too, the practice

[4] Ibid., 33.

[5] Ibid., 36.

[6] Ibid., 54.

[7] Ibid., 58.

of pilgrimage can become pivotal in shaping the spiritual identity of individuals and communities.

Sweet's third descriptor of the Postmodern outlook is that it is image-driven. Contrasting again the modern and Postmodern worlds, he succinctly states, "Postmodern culture is image-driven. The modern world was word-based."[8] He includes in his system the use of metaphor because metaphors create images, if only in the mind. Indeed, Sweet's analysis again proves accurate and timely. We are constantly bombarded with images trying to persuade us of who we should be, and yet it is the imagery of pilgrimage, both literally and metaphorically speaking, that can provide Christians with needed insights into their identity in Christ.

In the final chapter, Sweet argues that a revolt against the individualism of modernity has led to a hunger to be connected to others, to establish community. In this sense, Postmodernism rejects "I think therefore I am" for "I am because we are." The "I," he says, needs "we" to be.[9] Sweet rightly reminds the church of this significant shift. He notes that whereas Postmoderns have "had it with religion," they have a deep desire for community and for belonging.[10] In this sense, practicing pilgrimage can be a valuable discipline because it allows individuals to collectively share in an experience with those in their local church and in a practice shared by millions around the globe.

Sweet unfortunately concludes his treatment of how the church might engage Postmoderns by resorting to talk about the web. Although his assessment is correct, the

[8]Ibid., 86.

[9] Ibid., 117.

[10] Ibid., 112.

Church must indeed engage meaningfully and excellently the cyber world, one would hope for other practical modes of engagement. This, of course, does not exhaust his further theorizing, but the reader is left to make the jump to practical ministry. Still, Sweet's treatment of the current cultural climate is invaluable and astute students will be helped in engaging their regionally tinged versions of Postmodernism. Perhaps an update on the study published in 2000 would help correct this minor matter.

Pilgrimage as Metaphor for the Christian Life: Richard Peace's *Pilgrimage: A Handbook of Christian Growth*

The first two reviews examined works relevant to the setting of St. John's, both in terms of historical background and contemporary cultural trends. These were necessary in establishing the influences that exert themselves on the culture of the local church. Like most churches, though, St. John's has experienced varying seasons of growth, stagnancy, and decline, teetering even now between uncertainty and confidence about the future. Posited in this project is that the practice of pilgrimage can enhance the faith and self-understanding of the believer as an individual and of the congregation as a whole, granting the membership of St. John's an understanding of the foundation on which to move into the future. With this view in mind, it is appropriate to look first at pilgrimage as a metaphor for the Christian life before considering it as spiritual discipline.

This is exactly the premise of Richard Peace's *Pilgrimage: A Handbook on Christian Growth*. Indeed, he alludes to the motivation behind the book, writing, "This movement from zeal to complacency has long puzzled me."[11] In turn, Peace seeks to

[11] Richard Peace, *Pilgrimage: A Handbook on Christian Growth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 1.

understand how and why Christians grow spiritually, the practices that can be employed for said growth, as well as identifying the things that hinder growth. He uses two contrasting images, that of settler and pilgrim, to frame his discussion and divides the book into four parts. The first section engages the images of settler and pilgrim, highlighted by an examination of Hebrews 11:13-16. Part two charts what the author calls the geography of pilgrimage, that is to say the stages of a Christian on a journey toward growth. The third division posits obstacles to growth, while the final section provides a look at resources toward growth. Because the book is ultimately conceived as a practical work for those seeking to mature in their faith, the author includes a number of exercises that can be completed by the would-be pilgrim for self-examination and encouragement for the journey.

Peace devotes the first three chapters of the book to contrast the imagery of settler and pilgrim, including a brief word on the role of psychology in the spiritual life. Most helpful for this project is Peace's discussion of settlers and pilgrims. Settlers, Peace suggests, are those who have grown content where and as they are. They might be described, too, as those who have lost sight of the call of Jesus to go out into the world, share burdens, and take up the cross.[12] Such contentedness results in stagnancy. In stark contrast with the settler is the pilgrim, which Peace says, "symbolizes life which is deeply satisfying—a single-minded pursuit of a significant goal which is undertaken because one is called to do so."[13] Here Peace turns to the biblical model of pilgrimage, reminding the

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[12] Ibid., 10-11.

[13] Ibid., 18.

reader of the journeys of Abraham, the newly-freed Israelites, as well as the example of Hebrews 11, and proposes three characteristics of the pilgrim: movement, a yearning to learn; a goal, which is to dwell in the presence of God; and a willingness to sacrifice for the goal, meaning some things will have to be left behind.[14] This section is perhaps the most helpful for pilgrimage at St. John's. If we are to discover our identity as a congregation we will have to come to grips with our calling as pilgrims not merely as practitioners of a discipline but as a people who are living a journey in which we are always moving toward something and someone greater than ourselves.

Peace takes up this notion of the journey of the pilgrim in part two of his book. He states adamantly, "Our life is either trending toward God or away from Him; there is no third alternative."[15] In the following chapters he delineates three phases of the Christian living, or pilgrimage—quest, commitment, and integration—with encounter, or conversion, being a fundamental experience born out of commitment and a preparation for integration. For Peace, the quest phase in pilgrimage is the time in which an individual seeks whether God exists and if he can be known. He likewise adds the meeting of personal belief and need inaugurates phase two of pilgrimage.[16] Commitment, maintains Peace, expresses itself in five areas: to Christian ideas, ethics, and community, to people in general, and to the person of Jesus. Through this commitment one encounters Christ and is then able to live more fully in faith, accompanied by repentance. In this

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[14] Ibid., 19-25.

[15] Ibid., 40.

[16] Ibid., 48, 57.

respect, conversion might be viewed as an ongoing process, and not a one-time event. As the commitment is integrated into one's life, Christian growth is the result.

In the final two sections of *Pilgrimage*, Peace expounds on impediments to growth and resources for growth. In each case, he reckons there are internal and external factors that contribute to progression or regression. He helpfully points out that the Christian life is not immunization from all troubles and hardships, even recognizing the church as an institution can be a hindrance to growth as can a plethora of difficult circumstances. He also cites a host of fears and personal motivations as internal barriers to growth. Perhaps it is the latter point that needs further discussion from Peace, since the potential benefit of the book is as much about discerning why we do not grow as it is about why we do.

Fittingly, Peace turns to resources for spiritual progress in part four. For forward progress, he argues, the pilgrim must continue learning, engaging the mind and heart for increased faithfulness. Reading, lectures, group discussion, etc. are all positive means of growth. Likewise, such learning can be greatly enhanced by the practice of pilgrimage. Here again Peace's ideas are particularly helpful for this project. The benefit of pilgrimage for St. John's is not only in discovering our corporate identity but also in providing an opportunity for individuals to learn more about who they are and who God himself is. Finally, Peace engages the inner resources at our disposal for growth. He commends paying attention to our dreams and intuitive means of knowing. In other words, he suggests listening for God's voice in the activity of the heart and mind.

The strength of Peace's book is its accessibility for the average reader, although there are some sections that will prove difficult. He helpfully constructs a pattern by which Christians grow and describes in simple terms the various phases followers of Christ must navigate. If the motivation for the book is how Christians grow and keep from becoming stagnant, Peace could offer much more in terms of the resources available to Christians. Nonetheless, his work provides a most helpful theoretical basis from which we at St. John's can practice pilgrimage as a resource for our own journey, together and individually.

Pilgrimage as Spiritual Practice: Charles Foster's *The Sacred Journey*

Whereas Peace helpfully describes the Christian life as one of pilgrimage, Charles Foster engages the subject as actual practice in *The Sacred Journey* as a part of the Ancient Practices Series by publisher Thomas Nelson. Perhaps less popular than other disciplines amongst evangelicals, this volume happily engages the practice in a series that also includes works on prayer, fasting, the Sabbath, communion, tithing, and the liturgical year. Foster's is a welcome addition on the subject at hand and is written in an accessible and personal style, exposing the writer's own self understanding as that of a pilgrim in both the metaphorical and literal sense. Foster tackles the whole of the practice and his discourse ranges from humanity's bent toward movement to the history of Christian pilgrimage, from theory to praxis, and from experienced-based discussions on beginning a journey to the return home. Phyllis Tickle kindly warns the reader in the

Foreword about the dangers of the journey Foster encourages, writing, "Either way, with pilgrimage, nothing is ever as it once was. Beware."[17]

After briefly sketching a theology of pilgrimage in the preface, Foster turns to natural theology in chapter one, noting humanity's tendency to walk. He writes, "Humans have never forgotten that they were designed as walkers. When things go wrong, they go for a walk, and whether through the action of serotonin or some ancient metaphysical mechanics, that seems to make things better."[18] Foster then makes a few remarks about pilgrimage in the context of the world religions before tackling the history of pilgrimage in the Christian tradition. An appropriate concern about the book is the lack of historical foundation laid. As an introduction, however, Foster places sufficient food for thought before the reader.

In chapter two, Foster gets to the point of developing his theology of pilgrimage, albeit in a less than conventional way. Foster writes in a more colloquial style, avoiding the formality of an academic theology. His first task is to take on critics of pilgrimage. Taking the offensive, he brands naysayers as Gnostics. Jesus, he reminds the reader, was a man who walked and who thusly "traveled light" and who was concerned primarily that the values of the kingdom might break into this world. Foster continues his discussion in chapter three, highlighting God's preference for the wanderer in the Old Testament. Abel and Abraham, he notes, found favor with God, representing men who were mobile, on the move, and not settled. Foster rounds out his theology in the fourth chapter, highlighting

[17]Phyllis Tickle as quoted in Charles Foster, *The Sacred Journey* (Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 2010), x.

[18] Foster, *The Sacred Journey*, 2.

the movement of the wise men, the holy family, and Jesus himself throughout his ministry.

If any criticism could be raised about Foster's analysis (and with the analysis of many pilgrimage proponents), it is that though God may favor the wanderer, he did set people in motion in search of places of settlement. God told Abraham not just "to leave" but "to go" to a *land* God would show him. Likewise, the wanderings of the Israelites would lead them to a Promised Land, a place flowing with milk and honey, a place where they could settle. Neither group was to be perpetual wanders. Even so, an understandable paradox remains. Though we might dwell for a time in this world, we may rightly see ourselves as aliens and strangers, a people who are longing for a better land, as Hebrews suggests. The metaphor of pilgrim encourages us to live lightly while here, as Foster advocates Christians should, and prompts us to move about as a means of knowing this God who calls, sends out, and even walks with and among his creation.

It is this notion of encountering Christ that Foster picks up in chapters five and six. In these pages, Foster espouses the benefits of pilgrimage. On the journey, Foster suggests, pilgrims are able to rid themselves of that which plagues them, not in terms of earning forgiveness but in letting go of pain or pain-causing behaviors. Likewise, as pilgrims journey more closely with the Spirit while on pilgrimage, they are primed to encounter Christ in new ways. This leads to the question of where a pilgrim should go, the issue taken up by Foster in chapter seven. Adopting the language of "thin places," he suggests simply there are places where God has acted in special ways. He writes, "Jerusalem is the classic thin place. Whether God chose it because it was thin, or whether

the membrane became thinner because it was pressed by the faithful feet or importunate hands of the pilgrims, I do not know. But I suspect both."[19] If his language seems to limit the presence of God, Foster corrects himself, writing, "In the Christian pilgrimage tradition, uniquely, the arrival point is less important than the journey."[20] In other words, the intentionality of the journey is of greater significance than the destination itself.

Chapters 8 through 12 consist primarily of the how and what-to-expect in pilgrimage. In these sections, Foster prepares the would-be traveler for the road of pilgrimage. His discourse ranges from how to pack to the physical and emotional feelings that inevitably make their appearance on pilgrimage. He, too, espouses the fellowship of believers that is shared by those on a common journey. Most helpfully, he observes, as Tickle did in the introduction, that pilgrimage changes the life and outlook of the sojourner. He proposes, "arrival is not arrival at all: it's a start." And so it should be and is for those who make the discipline a part of their spiritual regimen.

In the final two chapters, Foster returns again to a defense of pilgrimage for the sake of detractors and concludes the work with some closing remarks about how Christians naturally might see themselves as pilgrims. If anything, Foster's book can be criticized for its lack of detail, in other words, for its cursory treatment of the subject. Nonetheless, because of its broad scope, it remains an excellent primer on the topic and can serve as an invaluable introduction for the would-be pilgrim. His last words, are an appropriate ending, illustrating the nature of the Christian's path: "The first words of

[19] Ibid., 127.

[20] Ibid., 134.

Jesus to his [disciples] were rather different: 'Follow me.' Jesus said some other things, too, but as a summary of the four Gospels, 'Let's go for a walk together' is not bad."

Pilgrimage as Spiritual Practice: N. T. Wright's *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today*

For insight into pilgrimage in the Holy Land, N.T. Wright's *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today* is helpful. Though much of his analysis is wrapped in the context of his experiences, he addresses many of the same themes as Foster. In this regard his work is perhaps more accessible for the reader who desires less a metaphorical musing and more of a testimonial approach. Generally speaking, like Foster, Wright provides an introduction helpful for those considering the practice as a means to deepen their faith. He expounds on pilgrimage possibilities not so much by systematic analysis but by reflecting on the theme in context of his own practice of the discipline.

Because his introduction is particularly helpful for the novice, a brief word about it and his overall approach is beneficial here. Wright begins his book by engaging immediately the "non-consideration" of pilgrimage by evangelicals, who have historically associated the practice with relics, works righteousness, and even superstition. He offers a corrective to these misguided perceptions, writing, "Catholicism at its best, however, does not recommend the worship of creation, but the discovery of God at work in creation."[21] Pilgrimage, then, is simply a means by which believers can engage the Lord of Creation in the physical realm, a realm that Genesis says God viewed as good upon creation. Wright is honest about the mystical side of the practice the pilgrim

[21] N.T. Wright, *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 4.

is bound to encounter, rooting his affection for the discipline, at least in part, in experiences that cannot be neatly compartmentalized. About sensing God's presence in particular places, he says, "The only answer I have to this day is that when God is known, sought and wrestled with in a place, a memory of that remains, which those who know and love God can pick up."[22]

Wright also neatly frames the paradox of seeking a ubiquitous God via pilgrimage that all thinkers on pilgrimage must engage. On the one hand, he writes, "places and buildings can and do carry memory, power and hope; and that places where Jesus walked and talked, suffered, died and rose again can and do resonate with the meaning of what he did,"[23] while on the other, denying a Holy Land that requires pilgrimage and acknowledging, "the world as a whole, and all the countries within it, are now to be regarded as holy."[24] In other words the notions both of "come and see" and "He is not here. He is risen" provide a paradox for those making physical journeys as spiritual exercise. Maintaining the merit of pilgrimage, though, he contends, "First, pilgrimage to holy places has a valuable role within the Church's teaching ministry… there is something about simply being there which, for most people, goes to the heart of things… Second, pilgrimage to holy places is a stimulus and an invitation to prayer… Third, pilgrimage to holy places, though neither necessary nor sufficient for Christian living, can be for many a time of real growth and depth in discipleship."[25]

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[22] Ibid., 5.

[23] Ibid., 7.

[24] Ibid., 7.

[25] Ibid., 9-10.

As Wright shares his own pilgrimage experiences throughout the book, he offers helpful reflections of his own experience, further espousing the value of pilgrimage. For example, writing about Damascus in chapter one, he discovers:

> "We need, on a regular basis, to take stock, to see where we've come from, to lay our lives before our loving God and to ask for a fresh sense of direction. We need in that subsidiary sense, to be converted again and again on a regular basis, though of course conversion properly so-called is a unique event. We need, in prayer and reflection, to get in touch with our roots: to become aware in a fresh way of who we are and where we have come from, and particularly with how we came to Christian faith, whether gradually over many years or in a sudden blinding flash; to review what we have built upon that foundation, where we have come from in our pilgrimage."[26]

Likewise, reminiscing about Jerusalem he shares, "And the test whether pilgrimage is genuine is therefore the question, whether you're prepared for God to remake you instead, lovingly to break the brittle 'you' that you've so carefully constructed, to soften the clay in his hands until it's ready to be remolded, and then to make out of you what he had in mind all along, which may be quite different from what you wanted or expected."[27]

Like Foster's, Wright's work is helpful for those considering taking to the road as a means of seeking God. In his book readers will find a helpful, if short, analytical treatment of pilgrimage, as well as more meaningful reflections, as the author rethinks his own pilgrimage experiences. For members of St. John's and for this project, Wright's book, along with Foster's, serves as a means of examining pilgrimage and could be

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[26] Ibid., 18-19.

[27] Ibid., 64.

recommended to members for reading to learn more about their own potential as pilgrims.

The Role of Place in Spiritual Formation: Philip Sheldrake's *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* and *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God*

In his introductory treatment of pilgrimage, Charles Foster speaks of "thin places" as primary destinations for pilgrimage. Though he affirms the value of the journey is greater than the destination itself, he still muses that, "Landscape changes people. Men are chameleons: if they lie close enough to the land, they look like it."[28] In other words, places—landscapes, cityscapes, etc.—shape us and our perceptions. Some of those places, in Foster's terms, are "thin," inviting us to make them the locus of our journeys. Because the aim of this project is about congregational identity and not about pilgrimage for pilgrimage's sake, it is natural, then, to establish an underlying sense of why some space might be considered "sacred." For this, Philip Sheldrake proves most commendable.

Portions of two of his books are particularly helpful. In *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity*, Sheldrake elaborates on place and space within the Christian tradition in chapters one and two. In *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* he describes human identity in the context of place. His work sheds light on why pilgrimage has been a popular religious practice and, therefore, why it can prove helpful for the membership of St. John's.

[28] Ibid., 129.

In *Spaces for the Sacred*, Sheldrake defines places as space "that has the capacity to be remembered and to evoke what is most precious."[29] He suggests there is "… a crisis of place in Western societies – a sense of rootlessness, dislocation or displacement. Part of this crisis is cultural. At its root lies a decline in traditional systems of values and symbols – religious, ethical, and social. The resulting fragmentation tends, among other things to inhibit a clear world-view."[30] Sheldrake is clear, however, not to glorify place as simple, physical space or geographic locale. He contends, instead, that narrative is fundamental for place to be ascribed to a given space. He writes, "If place lends structure, context and vividness to narratives, it is stories, whether fictional or biographical, which give shape to place."[31] This is a helpful reminder that pilgrims make journeys to visit the narratives behind the structures and landscapes. Pilgrimage, in other words, is ultimately about the story that shapes the believer's faith.

Sheldrake, likewise, elaborates further on place in the Christian tradition: "The Christian community also developed from its earliest days a concern with the ways in which the *people* of God are the place of God… So place became a spatial expression of a life, a teaching and a theology."[32] Within this framework, he offers a helpful discussion on the role of physical church structures as windows into the narrative of God's people. Hence, the allure of pilgrimage to shrines, cathedrals, etc.

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[29] Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 1.

[30] Ibid., 2.

[31] Ibid., 17.

[32] Ibid., 37.

In *Spirituality and Theology*, Sheldrake is most helpful when elaborating on the significance of place and in expounding on the paradox of pilgrimage in light of God's ubiquity. Noting the cultural conditioning landscapes exert over humanity, Sheldrake iterates, "Place also has the capacity to reveal and evoke the sacred or the deepest meaning of existence. This transcends what can be uttered or ultimately known. It has a transformative effect because at that moment and in that place our inmost selves stand exposed and naked. Sacred place or, better, the sacred quality of place, is where the timeless and the deep can be found and in this is both grace and revelation."[33]

Sheldrake also wrestles with the notion of God's omnipresence, freely acknowledging, "A God of freedom could never comfortably be contained in one place,"[34] a notion that would seemingly remove the sense of sacred from any particular space. Still, that is not the full story, for the God who is everywhere-present, Sheldrake observes, "is nevertheless made known by acts of self-placement."[35] Indeed, pilgrimage continues because of God's self-placement, but pilgrimage can occur anywhere because of the free presence of God. In this Sheldrake happily reminds us that as helpful as the practice of pilgrimage might be, there is great need for Christian pilgrims to be aware of God's presence in all places. This criterion is informative for St. John's, where we seek to enhance a sense of local identity by making pilgrimage to those places where God has revealed himself in defining ways to all humanity. In this way, Sheldrake speaks

[33] Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 169.

[34] Ibid., 175.

[35] Ibid., 176.

powerfully to a pilgrim people who are sojourners sometimes on unique journeys and in all life in general.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed here illustrates well the nature and purpose of pilgrimage, highlighting not only the practice but cultural, contextual, practical, and even geographical concerns of the practice. Jones's research defines the specific community context from which pilgrims from Cullman begin their journey. Sweet, on the other hand, provides a broader, philosophic foundation for the practice in a postmodern context. Peace's study guide likens all of Christian life to the concept of pilgrimage, while Foster and Wright engage the practice as spiritual discipline. Finally, Sheldrake theorizes about the actual meaning of space itself and how it shapes human spirituality. Together, these works provide an appropriate foundation for and defense of the practice of pilgrimage.

CHAPTER 4

ECCLESIOLOGICAL CONCERNS AT ST. JOHN'S: A THEOLOGY EQUAL TO ITS HISTORY

St. John's theological heritage, unique among the Christian community in Cullman specifically and Alabama in general, makes it not only an anomaly on the religious landscape but also little understood by area residents. The greater misfortune is its wonderful inheritance is hardly appreciated by the congregation itself, a dilemma this project seeks to remedy. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, St. John's has experienced little stability in terms of its ecclesial affiliations over the course of its history and currently does not operate under the strict guidance of a denominational structure. This lack of known connectedness contributes further to the community's confusion of the church's identity. Furthermore, lack of intentional theological education at St. John's and misunderstood constitutional guidelines for the running of the church contribute to the congregation's lack of understanding.

More encouragingly, core components of theology are taught and, because historic affiliations of St. John's have been ecumenically minded, the current situation

allows flexibility in ministering to the community and individuals unfamiliar with or exhausted by denominational affiliation. The following discussion of the various practices at St. John's provides a framework from which the congregation can begin to gain a better self-understanding, while also providing helpful information to be shared in educational and devotional settings and as a part of pilgrimage preparation, specifically to Reformation sights.

Influence of Historical Affiliations: The Protestant Reformation and Catechesis

Formational influences on St. John's were profoundly German. Immigrants from Germany brought with them presuppositions about the world that shaped them as a people and a desire to maintain their ethnic and cultural identity. Their religious heritage illustrates well this point. The congregation's original charter establishes this notion, while the manuals selected for catechesis reflect the same desire. Martin Luther and the variety of Protestant traditions that spawned the Heidelberg and Evangelical catechisms have been the primary theological influences throughout the congregation's history.

Martin Luther and a German Protestant Heritage

St. John's founding name was First Evangelical Protestant Church. According to the original constitution, it was an appellation "that shall never be changed," although "the freedom of mind," espoused in Section 2, ultimately outweighed the charge of Section 1 when the congregation overlooked the dictate and changed its name. The next two sections of the founding document are telling of the pragmatic concerns of the congregation's founders, stating the need for hymnbooks and a catechism, as well as a

keen intent to do things as they were done in Germany. Article 1, Section 4 even affirms that, "In church rituals, for instance Holy Communion, Holy Baptism, Confirmation and in observing Sunday and Holiday services, we follow strictly the old custom of the fatherland and declare ourselves firmly against all modern ideas which have been borrowed from the English Sects, therefore against the so called new rules of kneeling, penitence bank, longer services and so on." The exact context evoking these remarks unfortunately remains unknown, though they are indicative of an ardent intent to maintain familiar, ethnic practices. If the circumstances prompting the comments were the practices of nineteenth-century southern evangelicals, such as emphasis on conversion experience, camp meeting revivals, etc., the irony should not be lost that they were the evolutionary offspring of other German influences, namely Pietism.

Still, a brief word about what it meant for the settlers of Cullman to maintain the traditions of their homeland is in order. No doubt Martin Luther and his sixteenth century revolution were the dominating influences on Christianity in Germany. Although Luther's revolt did not produce a singular religious practice or theology for all Germans, three key theological principles did become fundamental for all Protestants, namely *Sola Scriptura*, *Sola Gratia*, and *Sola Fide*. In short, *Sola Scriptura* was the affirmation that Scripture alone was the rule of life and faith for Christians. Certainly no pope or ecclesial hierarchy could be considered equal. *Sola Gratia* meant that salvation was founded on God's grace alone and not by human merit. Finally, *Sola Fide* neatly described the Christian's only access to this grace was through trusting in the character and work of Christ. These three principles became the hallmarks of virtually all Protestantism. To see

how these principles have played out in the life of St. John's, awareness of the theological interpretations of Scripture adopted by the congregation is paramount. This can be done chiefly through an examination of the catechisms employed by the congregation throughout its history.

The Evangelical Catechism

Manuals for instruction, or catechisms, have shaped theological perceptions at St. John's since the congregation's inception and reflect the body's Christian outlook. In the context of its historic ecumenical spirit, there remains at St. John's an abiding connection with the congregation's past, tracing its lineage to the Protestant Reformation and the various ecclesial traditions it spawned. Furthermore, the custom of age-based confirmation, as St. John's practices it, speaks to a particular brand of spirituality, namely that, as God covenants with his people, so his promises are for believers and their children and their children's children (Acts 2:39). Though it is likely the congregation used one of Luther's Catechisms as a teaching aid early on because of the variety of Lutheran pastors who have served at St. John's, the two of the most influential theological manuals over the course of the history of the church have been the Evangelical Catechism and the Heidelberg Catechism, with the latter probably being the most used, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first.

Generally speaking, German immigrants of the nineteenth century brought with them a different religious outlook than earlier immigrants from Germany. Indeed, eighteenth-century German colonists tended to be Reformed in their background and the institutions they established were essentially American denominations by the nineteenth

century. More ecumenically minded immigrants in the nineteenth century would found what became known as the Evangelical Synod of North America. Though these historic ethnic German denominations would later merge to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the immigrants of the nineteenth century did not find the existing institutions to be a comfortable fit upon their arrival. James Wagner notes the biggest question for these latter German immigrants was who could minister to the religious needs of the people. He adds, "It seemed that the new settlers must shape their own religious fellowship at first, leaving for the future the question of how they were to be related to Christians who had come to America in other days."[1] Nonetheless, the seeds of a future merger were inherent in the teachings of the Evangelical catechism, as well as the Heidelberg, both reflecting influences of Lutheran and Reformed convictions.

Though not used in recent decades, St. John's employed the Evangelical Catechism for instruction by the early twentieth century. Whereas theologians had written the Heidelberg Catechism under the auspices of a state church, pastors "in der Busch," that is on the American frontier, penned the Evangelical Catechism.[2] Though different eras and circumstances ultimately command similar theological questions and answers, physical and social settings often present vastly different practical needs and varying means of expression. Accordingly, these two catechisms are prime examples of a similar theology expressed for audiences in very different situations. Because St. John's was first

[1] Menzel, in *A History of The Evangelical and Reformed Church*, ed. Lowell Zuck, 158-159.

[2] Frederick Trost, ed. and trans., *The Evangelical Catechism: A New Translation for the Twenty-first Century* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 11.

a part of the Evangelical Synod and used the Synod's resources, the Evangelical Catechism is also informative about spiritual formation at St. John's.

Frederick Trost describes *The Evangelical Catechism* as presenting "a faith worthy of emulation—not faith easily tossed aside or planted in the rocky soil of fragile, questionable, shallow opinion, but faith anchored in the fertile ground of deep, joyous, hopeful conviction."[3] He also understands the work to reflect an earthy simplicity, writing, "The little book they composed is not a compilation of profound theological knowledge. It is rather a piece of evidence that, at a certain point in time and at a certain place in history, there were those who sought, in plain, straightforward ways, to bear witness as best they could to the faith, hope, and love of their mothers and fathers, and at the same time to their own beliefs."[4]

But more than a simpleton's manual, the Evangelical Catechism captures well the motto *In Essentials Unity, In All Things Charity*, reflecting the Evangelical Synod's ecumenical position. Like the Heidelberg Catechism, the Evangelical Catechism affirms the divine initiative in reaching out to a lost humanity. Trost is again instructive, assessing the Catechism's message as saying, "It is not we who have to take care of God by our sturdy belief, but God who takes care of us by the wonder of divine love, reaching out to us in mercy and kindness."

Reformed elements are also immediately recognizable in the Evangelical Catechism. Just as the Westminster Confession questions what the chief end of man is, question one of the Evangelical Catechism asks, "What should be the chief concern of

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., 11.

man?" The response, "Man's chief concern should be to seek after the Kingdom of God and his righteousness," is not only happily succinct but provides building blocks for the introductory section, which asks similar questions about righteousness and salvation. Reflecting the internal struggle of Luther himself, question three asks, "What then must we do to be saved?" The reply is to the point: "We must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ."

After clarifying the most urgent matters that haunt humankind, the Catechism turns to understanding God himself, describing God and his attributes. Here the Evangelical Catechism offers a systematic, yet simple, description of God's most basic attributes. Question six asks, "What has God revealed about himself in the Bible?" The response, "In the Bible God has revealed to us that he is One God, that he is Spirit, and that he is Life, Light, and Love," unfolds in the following questions. Rather than offering deeply reflective responses, the Evangelical Catechism simply dictates that God is life means he is eternal, unchangeable, and ever present. Likewise the Catechism maintains that because God is light means he is true, all-knowing, all-wise, holy, almighty, and just. Finally, the work teaches that to say God is love means he is blessed, good, gracious, and merciful. We see in these definitions that the Evangelical tradition was not necessarily a-theological, but aspired to maintain the simple beauty of the most basic tenants of the Christian faith.

The Evangelical Catechism stresses that to have faith in God is to trust God. Question eighty defines faith as "complete trust in God and willing acceptance of his grace in Jesus Christ." Parts four and five of the Catechism establish a sacramental faith.

This is important because St. John's views Baptism and Communion as sacraments and not mere ordinances. Likewise, this discussion directs us to the final question of the Catechism, which is about Communion. Comparable to the beauty of the first response in the Heidelberg Catechism, which we will examine in turn, is the final response in the Evangelical Catechism. Describing the Christian's response to Communion, the Catechism admonishes,

> Our communion requires that we daily keep in remembrance the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus, and that we consider well how hard it was for our Saviour to bear our sins and the sins of the whole world, and to gain eternal salvation for us by offering up his life and shedding his blood, And since our sins caused the Lord Jesus the greatest sufferings, yea bitter death, we should have no pleasure in sin, but earnestly flee and avoid it; and being reclaimed by our Saviour and Redeemer we should live, suffer and die to his honor, so that at all times and especially in the hour of death we may cheerfully and confidently say:
>
> Lord Jesus, for thee I live, for thee I suffer, for thee I die! Lord Jesus, thine will I be in life and death! Grant me, O Lord, eternal salvation! Amen.

In these respects the Evangelical Catechism reflects life at St. John's today. Fundamental tenets are proclaimed and reinforced with great regularity, but theology is discussed in simple, if sometimes passing ways, as reflected in the Evangelical Catechism. Where simple answers suffice, they are championed. When more difficult questions arise, there is simply a hope, and a trust, that indeed God is both sovereign and merciful.

The Heidelberg Catechism

Whereas the Evangelical Catechism was common for a season at St. John's, the Heidelberg Catechism has proved to be the more enduring of the two religious primers. Though much might be said about how the Heidelberg Catechism impacts and reflects

life at St. John's, it is appropriate to note first that both the Catechism and the congregation under discussion share an ecumenical outlook. Fearing religious discord in the Palatinate in the mid-sixteenth century, Elector Frederick ordered Lutheran and Reformed theologians to find common ground. The efforts of Ursinus, a student of Melancthon, and Olevanius, a Reformed preacher, produced the Catechism, a work praised as, "The most ecumenical of the confessions of the Protestant churches." [5]

Both Lutheran and Reformed sensitivities are apparent in the treatise. Lee Barrett notes, "Like the Lutheran confessions, it tends to focus on the work of Christ, emphasizing God's redemptive activity…[and] concentrates on the individual's spiritual need for reconciliation in the face of sin and for solace in the face of tragedy and insecurity."[6] Likewise, he suggests Reformed motifs are equally present, pointing out that in the Catechism, "God is sufficiently powerful to ensure that all will ultimately be well with us, although the document refuses to speculate about exactly how God's will operates in the universe to bring about the state of felicity… Also in a Reformed manner it reminds us that although Christ is indeed in solidarity with us (as Lutherans stressed), nevertheless Christ rules with sovereign power in heaven."[7]

Turning to the themes of the Catechism itself, we find important concerns of guilt, grace, and gratitude, which St. John's still holds to be of fundamental importance in its approach to ministry. The first question of the Catechism, "What is your only comfort, in

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[5] Allen Miller and Eugene Osterhaven, eds and trans., *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1962), 5.

[6] Lee Barrett, trans., *The Heidelberg Catechism: A New Translation for the Twenty-first Century* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), 24.

[7] Ibid., 25.

life and in death?" is telling of the spirituality of the whole document. Championing a focus on the providential care of a benevolent God, the response reads:

> That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

This beautifully crafted statement sets a tone for everything that follows. God is sovereign over all that might torment or befall humanity; God alone is the source of all comfort and well being; and God himself enables his creation to respond in faithfulness. These words reflect well the practices of St. John's. Christians are to faithfully proclaim the Gospel and trust that God is at work in the lives of those who hear.

The second question and response helps to clarify the first, positing three fundamentals to be embraced to "live and die in the blessedness of this comfort." The response proposes that the greatness of sin, the freedom of redemption, and the gratitude owed to God for redemption compose the basics of Christian spirituality.[8] Indeed, the rest of the Catechism develops according to this threefold pattern. Part I engages human sin and guilt in light of God's Law. Part II discusses redemption and freedom by the grace of God through Christ Jesus. Finally, Part III describes an appropriate response of gratitude and obedience to be lived by the power of the Holy Spirit. In this respect, the Catechism is suggestive of a Trinitarian spirituality, underscoring the three persons of the Godhead,

[8] As an example of current practice, at least every year for the past seventeen years (reflecting the tenure of our current pastor), confirmands are expected to memorize and share with the congregation questions one and two from the Heidelberg Catechism. The Catechism itself has been in use for at least the last twenty-six years (when the writer of this paper was a confirmand) and has been used variously throughout the history of the congregation.

Father, Son, and Spirit. St. John's affirms each of these basic assessments of the Christian faith and typically communicates them in simple and straightforward fashion as does the Catechism.

Lastly, the Heidelberg Catechism affirms the fundamental assertions of the Protestant Reformation that guide St. John's today: Scriptural authority, God's grace, and salvation through faith. Accordingly, the answer to question three affirms that it is "from the Law of God" that we learn of "sin and its wretched consequences," while the response to question nineteen affirms a biblically-rooted spirituality, maintaining that we know of God's gracious sacrifice and our redemption from the holy gospel, which was foreshadowed in the lives of the patriarchs as well as the proclamations of the prophets and the sacrificial rites of the Old Covenant. Finally, question twenty-one addresses faith, asserting, "It is not only a certain knowledge by which I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in his Word, but also a wholehearted trust which the Holy Spirit creates in me through the gospel, that, not only to others, but to me also God has given the forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation, out of sheer grace solely for the sake of Christ's saving work." In succinct fashion the Catechism describes faith as knowledge and trust, while also espousing the benefits of that knowledge and trust.

The theological depth and beauty of the Catechism, as well as its deeply personal nature and trusting attitude of the sovereignty of God, mark well the hallmarks of St. John's theology and practice. Humanity's sinfulness and gratitude to God expressed in compassion toward the personal plights of others fittingly summarize the theological and ministry outlook of St. John's. A final note, however, is in order regarding the

catechisms. Though both works have shaped life at St. John's, most are unable to articulate that influence in a way that reflects an understanding of who St. John's is called to be based on those influences.

Biblical and Theological Reflections: St. John's in Light of the Scriptures and Church Tradition

The theological traditions that have most shaped St. John's have kept the congregation from becoming narrow in its view toward the larger Christian tradition. Indeed, enduring the factitious leanings of some pastors, the congregation has only formally affiliated with more ecumenically minded ecclesial bodies. Connection with the Evangelical Synod and the United Church of Christ particularly reflect this view. Influences, as discussed above, have remained and continue to influence the congregation today. It is not incorrect to say, however, that St. John's employees a healthy ecumenism, even as that openness continues to challenge the direction of and practices within the congregation.

An Ecumenical Mindset

It is out of the milieu of the original constitution's undefined insistence on doing things as they had been done in Germany that St. John's emerged as an ecumenically minded congregation. Because there was not a true German uniformity for worship in the nineteenth century, German-ness itself seems to have been the unifying and driving factor for St. John's in its earliest days. In fact, German pastors were called to St. John's with little concern given to their particular theological background. Once a pastor had been called, the congregation simply paid dues to the sending Synod. Theophil Menzel affirms

this practice was typical among nineteenth-century Germans settling in the Midwest, writing, "What determined the later denominational affiliation of most of these churches was the question of the procurement of pastors. The denomination that supplied a local parish with a pastor usually made headway in gaining that parish as a member congregation."[9] And so it would ultimately be for St. John's when Reverend Aufderhaar led St. John's into the Evangelical Synod in 1925. What is a great strength for the congregation, then, is also the very dynamic that has blurred the congregation's self perception and hinders the membership's thoughtful reflection about their unique calling for ministry in Cullman. The following discourse provides a more detailed reflection on the historical roots for the ecumenicity practiced at St. John's, a characteristic that cannot be overemphasized and must be understood.

An attitude of cooperation among German Christians on the American frontier in the nineteenth century reflected a larger trend in Germany, namely the growing concern for unity among Christians. Menzel contends:

> Before and after the age of Napoleon there had been some attempts to create order out of the jumble of German ecclesiastical life. In Prussia, King Frederick William III (1797-1840) took action which gave expression to tendencies that had been noticeable for some time. In 1817 the Evangelical Church, the Church of the Prussian Union, was set up in his kingdom… Thus he decreed that the Lutheran and Reformed elements in his kingdom were to work together as one union. For generations many of his subjects had been asking the question, 'Why don't the churches get together?' William announced that the Protestants of his realm would work together as a united church body to be called the 'Evangelical Church.'[10]

[9] Menzel,162.

[10] Ibid., 148-149.

He adds, "At this time Westphalia, Baden, and other Rhine provinces adopted the same principle. As early as 1818 it was introduced in the Bavarian Palatinate and in 1827 in Dessau."[11] Though all German Christians were not so congenial about working toward a greater unity, an ecumenical spirit was apparent among many, partially due to perceived growing threat of the aforementioned Rationalists on religion in general (see Chapter 1).

German Christians immigrating to the United States in the nineteenth century found it difficult to connect with existing, ethnically-influenced German congregations. Now more American than German, and often far removed from new patterns of settlement, older German-inspired denominations were largely ineffective in partnering with recent German arrivals. Likewise, many immigrants were not inclined to abandon ecumenical principles to join with Lutherans. Out of the Midwest, emerged the Kirchenverein des Westens (Church Society of the West) in 1840, the forerunner of the Evangelical Synod of North America. St. John's would make its first formal commitment to a larger church organization in 1925 when it joined the Evangelical Synod.

The Kirchenverein and subsequent Evangelical Synod were characterized by an ecumenical spirit brought from Germany. Carl Schneider confirms western settlers came from unionistic provinces such as Prussia or Bavaria and were not drawn by prospects of becoming Lutheran or Reformed. The fact that many of the pastors serving the area were called from missionary societies that were non-confessional only encouraged this more ecumenical outlook.[12] This is not to say individuals or particular congregations of the

[11] Ibid., 150.

[12] Schneider, 101-102.

nineteenth-century never leaned theologically toward Lutheranism or Reformed teachings. They did, but as Schneider affirms:

> their common lineage from the Reformation and the spiritual affinity of large numbers of each group with the other led to the conclusion that the prevailing cleavage was rooted in distinctions between essentials and non-essentials, between things fundamental and things less fundamental, between primary and secondary articles of faith. The particularistic status of the respective churches was to be overcome through a new Church in which the separating factors would be displaced by those elements which in the primitive and apostolic communities united the faithful into a communion of saints.[13]

Emphasizing such essentials, the Kirchenverein withstood scrutiny from its critics for its lack of theological conviction, though it did make the following faith affirmation: "We recognize the Evangelical Church as that communion which acknowledges the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as the Word of God and as the sole and infallible rule of faith and life, and accepts the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures as given in the symbolic books of the Lutheran and Reformed Church…"[14] This broad pronouncement helped assure that the Society's German constituency would feel at home in the organization regardless of theological particularities, if indeed those preferences were not offended by an ecumenical mindedness.

This is important for St. John's if for no other reason than the Evangelical Synod is the first ecclesial body St. John's formally joined. That the congregation aligned itself with this particular organization speaks to its own history and theological outlook.[15] On the one hand, St. John's was a German church and would feel at home with others of a

[13] Ibid., 398.

[14] Ibid., 409.

[15] Records indicate multiple pastors studied at Elmhurst and/or Eden Seminary.

similar ethnic background. On the other hand, that St. John's would consider the Evangelical Synod speaks to a mutually held, whether explicitly or implicitly, attitude toward theology and the call to unity by Christ. Some evidence for such a broad understanding of the Christian church presents itself from St. John's earlier days. In 1885 when Reverend Engelbert who had strong ties to the Missouri Synod Lutheran church was candidate for pastor at St. John's, the congregation ultimately rejected his candidacy, presumably because of concerns with the Missouri Synod. In spite of Englebert's rejection, a Lutheran appeal remained strong enough at St. John's that the inscription above the doors to the sanctuary read St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Interestingly, construction took place in 1922, just three years prior to St. John's joining the ecumenically-minded Evangelical Synod. On one level, it would seem natural to assume that St. John's was indeed a Lutheran congregation and that much of the membership simply did not care for Reverend Englebert. The earliest constitution of St. John's, however, reminds us that the church was founded with the ecumenical outlook common to many nineteenth-century Germans as the church was then called First Evangelical Protestant Church. In short, it seems the congregation typified the ecclesial struggle of many newly-formed German congregations of the 1800s, ultimately eschewing connections with more theologically narrow organizations.

Joining the Evangelical Synod would have further bearing on the congregation's ecumenical outlook. Ecumenically inclined as the Evangelical Synod was, it was natural for its leadership to seek union with other Christian organizations. That inclination came to fruition in 1931 when the Synod joined with the German Reformed churches to form

the Evangelical and Reformed Synod of North America. Together, these two organizations could build on a common Reformation heritage, as well as share in other historical and theological influences. James Wagner comments that the E&R,

> has rejoiced in its inheritance from the prophets and apostles, the saints and martyrs, from the whole Christian church throughout all the world, and from the holy life, redeeming death, and triumphant resurrection of the church's Lord. It has been enriched by the doctrinal and devotional influences of Wittenberg and Geneva, by the unique admixture of German pietism and the humanism of Holland and its lesser counterpart in Switzerland, and by the ameliorating spirit of Melanchthon and the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism.[16]

Remarking on the merger, John Baltzer asserted something greater would be needed for such a union to take root, writing, "Not the personality of Luther nor that of Calvin, but only the personality of Christ—and 'he liveth'—may, can, and will give to all the basis of union in spirit."[17] As Protestants with strong ties to the German Reformation, each of these organizations could set aside particularities of Catechisms and confessions to affirm anew the authority of Scripture. Accordingly, the E&R Constitution affirmed:

> The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are recognized as the Word of God and the ultimate rule of Christian faith and practice. The doctrinal standards of the constituent churches are accepted as interpretive statements of the essential truth of evangelical (Protestant) Christianity as taught in the Holy Scriptures. In these statements of faith, ministers and members are allowed liberty of conscience whose final norm is the Word of God.[18]

Finally, Wagner also offers this assessment of the merging parties:

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[16] James Wagner, *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church.* Ed. Lowell Zuck (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1990), xxiv.

[17] John Baltzer as quoted in James Wagner, *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church*, 281.

[18] *The Constitution of the Evangelical and Reformed Church* as quoted in James Wagner, *A History of the Evangelical and Reformed Church*, 292

> The Evangelical and Reformed Church and its predecessor communions have steadfastly contended that our experience of God in Christ is always greater than, and beyond, our descriptive powers, and that, therefore, the faith we proclaim is, as the bond of Christian fellowship and the basis of church union, prior, central, and superior to the doctrinal formulations and political forms which each succeeding generation give to that faith.[19]

These words describing the E&R Synod characterize well the outlook of St. John's to this day: a biblically-based faith that allows freedom of conscience in areas where the Scriptures remain silent. To be sure, St. John's affirms the Lordship of Christ and that he is the way, the truth, and the life. The ecumenical outlook of the congregation, however, effectively embraces all those within orthodox Christian traditions.

Large-scale ecumenical involvement for St. John's would not end with the merger of the Evangelical and Reformed synods. In 1957 the E&R church would join with Congregationalists to form the United Church of Christ. The preamble to *The Basis of Union of Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church* is a striking statement of ecumenicity. In spite of ethnic, historic, and theological differences, the two organizations affirmed they were "united in spirit and purpose and are in agreement on the substance of the Christian faith and the essential character of the Christian life." Likewise, they affirmed a devotion "to one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our membership in the holy catholic church, which is greater than any single Church and than all the Churches together." Furthermore, the document claims that denominations do not exist for themselves but as part of the catholic church, "within which each denomination is to live and labor and, if need be, die." Finally, the basis of

[19] Wagner, xxv.

union appeals to the words of Jesus, "that they all may be one," to justify and celebrate the merger.[20]

Guiding Principles for Ministry

Although St. John's insists the rule for life and faith is Scripture, the body's constitution provides a more precise theological expression of the congregation's purpose. Article IV supplies that rationale:

> The avowed purpose of this organization shall be the worship of the true God as revealed in the Old and New Testaments and made known to us through the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We commit to the practice of loving service towards the needy, the building of the kingdom of righteousness, the furtherance of Christian unity and promotion of Christian fellowship among the membership.

These admonitions, themselves derived from the Old and New Testament, provide the basic ministry framework for St. John's. Since half of the statement is given to worship, it is no surprise St. John's today emphasizes above all other pursuits corporate worship gatherings. The remainder of the statement, however, speaks to the call of the congregation as well, purposes generally fulfilled, if sometimes only as secondary concerns.[21]

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[20] *The Basis of Union of Congregational Christian Churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church*. (The Executive Committee of the General Council of the Congregational Christian Churches and the General Council of the Evangelical and Reformed Church, 1947), 3.

[21] Although the purpose statement is found without references, the following notations are informative of the declaration's scriptural basis: Worship – Exodus 3:12; Psalm 29:2; 96:9; 100:2; Matthew 4:10; John 4:20-24; Revelation 14:7; 22:9. The true God – Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 6:4-5; John 17:3. Revealed in the Old and New Testaments – 2 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:1-2. Made known to us through the Holy Spirit – John 16:13; Acts 2:14-21. Preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ – Romans 10:14-15. Loving service towards the needy – Amos; Matthew 22:37-39; Luke 12:32-34; Galatians 2:10. The building of the kingdom of righteousness – Matthew 6:10; Romans 1:17; Ephesians 4:24. The furtherance of Christian unity – John 17:20-23; Ephesians 4:1-13. Promotion of Christian fellowship among the membership – Acts 2:42.

Since Worship is the formally stated emphasis of St. John's life, further discussion is in order. For members of St. John's to gain a better grasp of their identity, knowledge about the congregation's worship in the past will prove helpful. These words from *The Evangelical Book of Worship* provide an appropriate point of departure, highlighting the significance of worship for Christians:

> The great truths and historic facts of Christianity may be expressed in statements of doctrine; but unless they come to expression also in the common exercises of devotion, they are almost certain to be lost to the living consciousness of the Church. It is true that the language of devotion is different from the language of definition. It is simpler, warmer, less intellectual and more emotional. It falls naturally into an utterance reflecting the deep currents of experience, and moves under the impulses of the quickened heart. But the facts which enter into this experience, and the truths which quicken the heart to penitence, prayer and praise, are none other than those which enter into the fabric of the faith. Devotion, in order to be helpful and sincere, must translate the elements of our belief into the language of confession and petition, adoration and thanksgiving, consecration, intercession and benediction, joyful praise and solemn sacrament.[22]

In short, to understand the persona of a congregation, it is fitting to examine its worship, which can be done formally through its books of worship and worship resources.

The Evangelical Synod's publication is indicative of a faith tradition that values order and structure. It likewise indicates an understanding of the ongoing need for the training of ministers and the assistance they need amidst the demands of the pastorate. Finally, according to its own language, this particular book of worship understands that it serves a tradition in flux, as it evolves from a German speaking church on the frontier of America into an American denomination whose membership has increasingly accepted English as its mother tongue. In short, the Evangelical Book of Worship details orders of

[22]John Baltzer as quoted in *The Evangelical Book of Worship* (St. Louis, 1916), iii.

service for public worship, liturgical holidays, celebration of the sacraments, weddings, funerals, confirmation, membership, ordination, and installation.

Though telling of what members of the tradition might have been exposed too, the Evangelical Book of Worship says little of what the congregation itself actually did in worship. To get a better feel for how St. John's has worshiped, a few words about hymnals are in order. The oldest hymnal used by the congregation that can be confidently confirmed is *The Hymnal* of the E&R tradition. In an informal poll of some older members, it was the first hymnal they remembered using, a work that drew from both the Evangelical and Reformed heritages.[23]

The first page of *The Hymnal* is unnumbered and entitled "Prayers on Entering the Church", indicating the primacy of prayer in Evangelical and Reformed worship and an understanding of the need to prayerfully prepare for worship. Again, the inclusion of such prayers is not indicative of actual congregational practice, but it is telling of the values of the E&R tradition. On the opposite side of the prayers in later additions is a Statement of Faith that affirms the Trinitarian nature of God, as well as the work of God and God's call to man. Regardless of the actual use of these prayers and faith affirmations, their presence would at least suggest a formative value, if only accomplished informally, by providing a constant reminder of these needful things.

The initial portion of *The Hymnal* includes orders for worship, suggesting a structured and orderly service form. Indeed, the tradition valued a liturgically-oriented structure of spiritual formation in both worship and its celebration of the various seasons

[23] The Evangelical and Reformed Church, *The Hymnal* (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1941), iv.

of the church year. Following a variety of suggested orders of worship are the Ten Commandments, Lord's Prayer, Apostles' Creed, and the Beatitudes, reflecting an approach rooted in the most basic fundamentals, ethical and creedal, of the historic Christian faith. These elements fit with the ecumenical concerns of St. John's and its historical ecclesiastical affiliations.

The hymns themselves are ordered according to no fewer than sixteen groupings, but the first hymn is telling of how the tradition and St. John's has typically viewed God. In conversations trying to determine the oldest remembered hymnal, the response from multiple individuals indicated the oldest in their remembrance was the one in which *Holy, Holy, Holy* was the first hymn. Finally, *The Hymnal* concludes with the inclusion of the lectionary and a collection of litanies and responsive readings, suggesting again the value placed upon an orderly approach to worship that engages the congregation and expects members to be active participants in worship.

Lastly, a note that suggests how St. John's appreciation of hymnody has evolved in recent decades is helpful. Such hymns as *He Leadeth Me*, *I Need the Every Hour*, *More Love to Thee*, *What a Friend We have in Jesus*, *Sweet Hour of Prayer*, and *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing* find themselves tucked away in the back of *The Hymnal* in the Miscellaneous Hymns section. Perhaps more than many of the hymns in *The Hymnal*, these have remained popular tunes at St. John's in more recent years.

In the late 1960s St. John's called its first non-German minister when the Reverend George Fidler arrived to serve as pastor. His twenty-plus years of service witnessed the addition of two new hymnals to St. John's worship. Both *Favorite Hymns*

of Praise and *The Broadman Hymnal* were less formal and less liturgically inclined than the E&R hymnal. Both included scripture-based responsive readings and a substantially smaller selection of sung benedictions and responses. Both were initially used in Wednesday evening prayer meetings outside of the sanctuary, though *Favorite Hymns of Praise* would eventually find itself alongside *The Hymnal* in the sanctuary. Neither book included words about a particular theological tradition or the importance of theology or church history. Likewise, neither included orders of worship for the various services of the church year. In short, the use of these two hymnals reflect the inclusive ecumenical nature of St. John's and a move away from its German past, as well as a less formal approach to worship.

Approximately fifteen years ago, St. John's ceased to use *The Hymnal* altogether and adopted *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration*, published by Word music. Like *Favorite Hymns of Praise* and the *Broadman Hymnal*, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* is less formal and less liturgically oriented than *The Hymnal*. This latest worship resource includes a foreword by popular Christian author Chuck Swindoll, who writes generally about the significance of worship and hymn singing. It includes a section of so-called Brief Services as a worship leader resource, but these suggestions amount to no more than a call to worship and a selection of hymns and specific stanzas

The arrangement of hymns is somewhat similar to that of *The Hymnal* in terms of its categories. It includes a variety of glorias, doxologies, etc… but the selection is not as extensive as *The Hymnal*. Scripture-based responsive readings are included, as well as are a couple of affirmations of faith. Unlike the E&R hymnal, those of this compilation are

more historical (Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, etc.) but find themselves tucked away toward the end of the book, as if an afterthought. Like the hymnals introduced in the 1970s at St. John's, *The Hymnal for Worship and Celebration* reflects a further distancing of St. John's from its theological past and a more informal approach to worship. Even today, the congregation is wrestling, formally and informally, with adding or transitioning to a more contemporary style of worship. Regardless of that decision, these hymnals reflect the changing nature of worship at St. John's. To be sure, one can look at the orders of worship from the 1960s and see many resemblances to today. Though the hymnals have changed, and perhaps changed our singing, there are remnants of the church's past still reflected in weekly worship at St. John's, including sung responses, such as the Gloria and the Doxology, and spoken affirmations like the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed.

The varied style of hymnal used over the last past fifty years suggests a musically evolving tradition. Many of the forms and practices espoused in early worship resources do not find a place in the more recently adopted hymnals. Nonetheless, many of the formal traditions have continued to shape the worship life of St. John's. Only in recent years has a strong movement to add a more intentionally relaxed and/or contemporary style begun to surface. In the midst of the various transitions mentioned earlier, worship at St. John's will likely undergo transformation. Though not necessarily bad, a loss of the traditions will further remove congregants from an understanding of their theological heritage. The paradox, of course, is the very freedom of that heritage to make such changes can also be the catalyst of a less-than-thoughtful practice of the faith.

The intent here is not to suggest worship at St. John's was inherently better in the past but to warn that a loss of heritage will likely result in a watered-down form of sentimentality, rooted less in God's truth and more in the quest for self fulfillment.

Evaluation of the Theology of St. John's and of Its Members

Today, St. John's reflects its storied history, existing as an independent, community church with no formal denominational ties. Affirming the need to relate to the wider church and to work with churches of a similar background, St. John's belongs to the Evangelical Association of Reformed and Congregational Christian Churches, a small organization of churches who fellowship, worship, and network together. True to the spirit of the congregation's former denominations, St. John's still strives to adhere to a biblically-based faith, rooted both in its historical traditions and the call of Christ to unity. Indeed, most visitors to St. John's are struck by the distinctiveness of our worship, commenting on both its uniqueness and seemingly warm familiarity. In that vein, St. John's is today the home to former Baptists, Lutherans, Methodists, Catholics, Pentecostals, and other denominations, and the congregation, as a whole, celebrates this ecumenical approach to Christian life and ministry, rooted in the worship of the one God as revealed in the Old and New Testament.

Church Polity: The United Church of Christ and the St. John's Constitution

St. John's is no longer connected with a formal denominational body but exists as an independent congregation. Its affiliation with the EARCCC has no bearing on the congregation's day-to-day, organizational, or directional functioning. As might be

expected, St. John's faces challenges erupting from unclear guidelines regarding responsibilities within the congregation. However, the office of the Senior Pastor and the church council are vested with most of decision making power in the context of a congregational polity that allows the entire congregation to vote on several matters. Most significant for St. John's in the immediate future is defining the roles of pastors and councils for organizational leadership.

Who Runs St. John's?

Since its inception in 1874, St. John's has operated under the authority of Scripture along with a constitution that spells out specifically the guidelines under which the congregation is to operate and make decisions. Fittingly, the opening statements of the congregation's charter, as previously noted, are from First Corinthians 14:40: "Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."[24] Inherent in these words is a sense that submission and orderliness are to characterize the congregation, at least in theory if not in reality. Numerous revisions have been made to the constitution over the church's one-hundred plus years of existence, though few substantive changes have been proposed. A move that prompted the United Church of Christ to dismiss St. John's from the denomination reflects one such monumental change. Whereas an earlier edition of the charter explicitly affirmed St. John's affiliation with the UCC, the updates made in the mid-1990s only reference its historical ties with the denomination (though not withdrawing its membership), while explicitly confirming its connection with the

[24] *Constitution and By-Laws of St. John's United Church of Cullman, Inc.* (Cullman, AL: St. John's United Church).

Evangelical Association of Reformed and Congregational Christian Churches. Section 2 of Article 1 forcefully asserts the autonomy of St. John's, stating, "Nothing in the Constitution and By-Laws of the United Church of Christ or the Evangelical Association shall destroy or limit the right of St. John's United Church of Cullman to continue to operate in the way customary to it," adding in a final remark its right "to withdraw by its own decision from the United Church of Christ or the Evangelical Association or any other Association at any time without forfeiture of ownership or control of any real or personal property owned by it."[25] These words, along with other factors, prompted more progressive elements of the UCC to dismiss St. John's from its ranks. Today, St. John's operates under a congregational polity.

Following the question of affiliation taken up in Article 1, a statement of faith is the topic of Article 2. The affirmation includes a basic statement asserting the authority of the Scriptures, a creedal affirmation akin to the Apostles' Creed, and a confirmation of baptism and the Lord's Supper as the two sacraments. Article 3, however, begins to spell out more specifically the authority under which St. John's operates. Again, the Bible is trumpeted as the authority, in accord with Article 2, section10, which affirms Christ as the Head of the church. This same Article likewise affirms the Heidelberg Catechism, Luther's Catechism, and the Augsburg Confession as authoritative interpretations of the Scriptures. Finally, the last section of Article 3 recognizes the congregation is to submit to Godly leadership in accord with the Scriptures.

[25] Ibid., Section 2 of Article 1.

First and foremost, then, St. John's is to be a worshiping body, through which the other activities of the church are born and given merit. Expectations of members are spelled out in Article 5, although those expectations are generic and best and lax at worst. For example, Section 1 reads, "Members are expected to be attend divine worship regularly, to commune regularly, and to contribute to the financial support of this church."[26] The original constitution insisted that attendance amounting to communion once a year, along with giving to the needs of the congregation, would suffice for membership. This minimal expectation is understandable in light of the transportation limitations of the day. Unfortunately, the updated version remains so lax that it lacks any real call to Christian discipleship. Section 2 of Article 7 fails to improve the cause, stating that the Pastor or Church has the responsibility to notify a member of their failure to remain active. Furthermore, only after a second year of inactivity is a member to be placed on an inactive roster, losing the rights of a communicant member. But what "regularly" means is left unanswered. On the other hand, the constitution does confirm a member's right to vote on all matters of church life, unless property and finances are in question, in which case the laws of the State of Alabama forbid minors to do so.

Article 8 gives the Pastor charge over the congregation's worship life, and stresses he or she is to have true Christian faith and must be able to preach and teach the Word of God. Similarly, Article 10 establishes a church Council for the purpose of supervision over "all material and spiritual matters of the congregation"[27] with the right to establish committees for such work. The same article insists the council is to assist the

[26] Ibid., Section 1 of Article 5.

[27] Ibid., Article 10.

Pastor and honor his spiritual leadership. In short, the constitution of St. John's establishes the congregation as body of believers operating under congregational polity. Within this framework, the congregation elects leaders to occupy the offices of pastor and council member.

Evaluation of the Operation of the Church

On the surface, St. John's seems to function as smoothly as any other congregation. Upon closer inspection, however, there are minor matters that could be improved upon. There are at least three areas of concern. The first of these is the expectation of the membership. Because the constitution places only minimal expectations on members, St. John's does find itself frequently dealing with individuals given to joining, quickly losing interest, and drifting away from the fellowship. Certainly some of the blame lies with existing members, staff, and structures, but when the church expects little, it often receives little. In other words, because joining requires only a minimum commitment, only a minimum commitment is often given by members. Here the pastoral staff and church council could do much to encourage the deepening of Christian fellowship, which the constitution verifies as a part of the purpose.

Of greater difficulty to discern is how the day-to-day material functioning of the church should be handled. Whereas the constitution gives the council charge over these functions, the de facto decision maker in most areas is the Senior Pastor. Lines can quickly become blurred in a larger church with many members and many activities. Whereas the constitution gives authority to the council, rarely do any of the members of that body have a full grasp of the daily needs of those facilities and the staff required to

handle them. On the one hand, the Senior Pastor becomes a sort-of chief executive, yet when his or her time is given to maintenance needs, financial concerns, and office personnel, his time given to explicitly spiritual matters becomes compromised. Pastor and council alike have at times made decisions on the grounds of expediency rather than the long-term good of the congregation. However, St. John's has functioned acceptably with little conflict in this area, although there have been some notable exceptions. Under the circumstances of rapid increase in income and facilities, the congregation has done well to maintain the level of stability it has. There still remains, however, some inconsistency in how the congregation operates, signifying growing pains with which to contend, much of which has to do with decision making authority.

Perhaps the area ripest for improvement within the life of St. John's is the council. It is unfortunate that the language of the congregation's first constitution has been lost. According to original documents, the council was to consist of elected elders and deacons. What St. John's has lost by losing the nomenclature, is a sense of the biblical warrant for the position. For decades, the council has functioned almost primarily as body that oversees the material life of the church, and, as discussed above, even that role has been limited in recent years. Rarely is the spiritual life emphasized in the nomination and selection of members and, at times, competing factions within the congregation simply want to place individuals on the council so that an alternative voice will be heard. Rather than continuing with the sense that council is a board that oversees expenses and income, St. John's will do well to establish the council anew as a group of spiritual leaders who serve the ministries of the church and pray for the congregation and its needs.

Conclusion

St. John's has the blessing of not being bound by highly regimented ecclesial structures that can be stifling to many congregations removed from distant, denominational headquarters. On the other hand the difficulty for St. John's is that it does not neatly fit within the categories understood by its surrounding community. St. John's has rightly been described as a church of the Reformation, a Community church, and a Jesus church. In final analysis these monikers are as apt as any, but they do not suffice to answer all the questions individuals have about the church's traditions. The beauty of St. John's is its encompassing nature, but therein lies the danger. If the congregation is not careful, it could easily compromise its identity, and the requisite depth of understanding of its history and the historic faith, for the sake of an easy, thoughtless faith. Although the congregation could maintain an appearance of faithfulness and perhaps accomplishment, it would forfeit the specific call Christ has for this unique-to-the-Bible-Belt congregation.

Theology at St. John's is a broad Reformation theology of the *Solas*, embracing Christ as Lord and all those who embrace the same. In practice, however, St. John's still struggles to live out what this means in terms of its worship and outreach. St. John's will do well to maintain its tradition of faith formation via the Heidelberg Catechism and might even benefit by exploring anew the Evangelical Catechism as a part of a needed theological education. Chapter 6 will return to the issue of the identity of St. John's, mapping out a pilgrimage plan appropriate for the congregation and detailing in more succinct language these key attributes that define St. John's. Before looking specifically

at this plan however, it will be necessary to first explore pilgrimage in wider terms in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5

RECOVERY OF PILGRIMAGE: DISCOVERING WHO WE ARE

The impulse toward pilgrimage seems to transcend religious persuasion and occupies a celebrated, if sometimes contested, position within the Christian tradition. Within Christendom, pilgrimage seems to be rooted in the notion that the physical world God created was good and that God has revealed himself in particular places at particular times in history. Whereas the Holy Land, the land of Abraham, the prophets, and Jesus, has been a focal point for Christian pilgrimage, a variety of locales have emerged to attract those desiring to put feet to faith and to deepen their faith in places where God has interacted with humanity. Christian pilgrimage continues to be an attractive and viable aid to the life of faith.

Scriptural Reflections: A Biblical Overview of the Christian as Pilgrim

Sally Welch defines pilgrimage as "a meaningful journey to a sacred place," adding, "The essence of pilgrimage is a journey made in a spirit of searching, with an openness to what the journey can teach," while Douglas Vest describes the practice

as travel to "a place which promises adventure, new options, change, and renewal."[1] Both of these writers recognize the nature of life as journey and both suggest that the practice of pilgrimage is a means to deepen intentionally one's faith and to appreciate more fully the life of faith. Steven Lewis develops the importance of journey further, reminding us, "Our spiritual journey can get so focused on arriving at a spiritual mountaintop that we ignore the beauty of the journey; however, it is the journey that prepares us for the arrival."[2] Taken together these remarks strongly suggest pilgrimage is a discipline that provides opportunity for critical reflection on life and deepening our communion with Christ.

The biblical text is replete with examples of journey takers, those who set out to walk in faith or lead others in faith. There is Abraham and God's command to go, a command that necessitated the patriarch leave things familiar for things unseen. Likewise, there is Jesus and his call to the disciples to leave their daily affairs and follow him. There is Moses and his band of runaway slaves making their way through the wilderness to a promised land. There is Saul on a road to Damascus and then there is Paul on the road and on the sea, winding his way throughout the Mediterranean world, inviting others to join him on a different kind of journey. There is Jonah who was sent to a foreign land and there were those two followers of Jesus who took to the road on a trip to Emmaus after his burial and resurrection. Most of these journeys were taken with great purpose. Some were taken with gratitude, while others were taken only with great

[1] Sally Welch, *Making a Pilgrimage* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009), 9. Douglas Vest, *On Pilgrimage* (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), 2.

[2] Steven Lewis, *Landscape as Sacred Space: Metaphors for the Spiritual Journey* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), 78-79.

hesitation. Nonetheless, in each case God's call was answered by the leaving behind of one kind of life for a new kind of being and a new understanding of living.

In this vein, the Christian life can easily be recognized in the metaphor of pilgrimage, as a journey to knowledge of God, to greater faithfulness, and to a renewed understanding of God's purposes for creation. Elmer Arndt describes the Christian life thusly:

> The Christian is a pilgrim. His life is a pilgrimage from the city of the world to "the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). His pilgrimage is not a flight from the duties of man's common life; his pilgrimage to the city of God binds him to service to the community of men. His hope of glory with the glorified Lord is bound up with the same self-sacrificial service of mankind that the crucified Jesus rendered. His pilgrimage is the continuation of the ministry of reconciliation in the world. The strength for persisting in that ministry in the face of seemingly overpowering opposition comes from the assured confidence that God, who has already in Christ won the victory for men, will complete his triumph in his own time.[3]

Biblically speaking the directive for pilgrimage as an explicitly commanded discipline is noticeably absent, but implicitly, examples abound, as any journey can become a pilgrimage with the right attitude and intent. Arndt's citation of Hebrews 11 is most compelling. Pilgrims seek something that cannot be found in the things or people of this world. Instead, they look beyond what the eye can see and embrace that to which their hearts compel them. The author of Hebrews continues, saying:

> All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them (Heb 11:13-16).

[3] Elmer Arndt, *The Faith We Proclaim* (Philadelphia: The Christian Education Press, 1960), 132.

Christian pilgrims are to adopt a way of living in accord with the values of the better kingdom Jesus spoke of, a kingdom he said was not of this world (Jn 18:36).

Like the author of Hebrews, Peter too incorporates the language of alien and strangers and alludes to a pilgrim life, writing, "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world…" (1 Pe 2:9-11). According to Peter, by receiving one's true identity as chosen and as part of a priesthood and a holy people belonging to God, the attitude one adopts toward this world is that of an alien or stranger or pilgrim. In other words the Christian as pilgrim is one who is journeying towards that something greater and more lasting.

Whereas the language and pattern of pilgrimage are plentiful in the Old and New Testaments so the spiritual discipline of pilgrimage emerged as a part of Christian practice in the earliest days of the faith. Though the exact command for all Christians to set out on the open road for spiritual reasons may be absent, there are commands to leave, to go, to follow, and to come. As Foster reminds us, Jesus's first words to his disciples were "Follow me." Moreover, he suggests, "Jesus said some other things, too, but as a summary of the four Gospels, 'Let's go for a walk together' is not bad."[4] A brief overview of Christian pilgrimages, then, is in order.

[4] Charles Foster, *The Sacred Journey* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 212.

Where Christians Have Wandered: An Historical Overview of Pilgrimage

The earliest, well-known Christian pilgrimages include the travels of Constantine's mother Helena to Palestine in the fourth century and, shortly thereafter, Egeria's expedition from Spain to the Holy Land in the late fourth or early fifth century. Undoubtedly, Constantine's legalization of pilgrimage enhanced the status of the journey to biblical sites, but even prior to these examples pilgrimage had emerged as a part of the devotional practice of many early Christians.

Possible Jewish antecedents for Christian pilgrimage were in place by the time of Christ, namely the tradition of visiting the tombs of notable Jews who had preceded them in the faith. Jesus alluded to this practice, remarking with some degree of disdain the whitewashing of the prophets' tombs (Mt 23:27) and criticizing the practice of venerating historic sites without heeding the words proclaimed by those they celebrated. The practice, whether observed rightly or wrongly, suggests that this kind of pilgrimage could easily have been adapted for devotional practice in the lives of the first Christians. Indeed, the account of Polycarp's martyrdom, written in 155, intimates that his bones were taken and put in a place so that the day of his martyrdom could be celebrated as a birthday. Other martyrs' tombs were apparently well established too. Eusebius noted that though Constantine built churches on the Mount of Olives, at Christ's tomb, and in Bethlehem, churches already existed on these sites, illustrating an early concern for sacred sites.[5]

[5] Peter Walker, *Pilgrimage in the Early Church* in *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, eds. Craig Bartholomew and Fred Hughes (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company,

Similarly, Melito of Sardis reportedly came as a pilgrim to the Holy Land in the mid-second century, while other ancient writings also suggest Bishop Alexander visited Jerusalem sometime before 213 and that Origen visited the Holy Land around 230. As a final illustration, it is important to note that by the year 200, a monument of St. Peter had been established in Rome, well before the Vatican would be constructed. Though the exact details of these events are debatable, their very mention indicates that some concept of pilgrimage was beginning to develop within the Christian tradition from a very early time.[6]

Unquestionably though, the status and popularity of pilgrimage changed radically under Constantine. Helena traveled to Palestine in the early third century in pious devotion and under the banner of the state. No longer a fringe movement, Christianity's elevated position promised unimagined opportunities for Christians, including new possibilities for pilgrimage. Peter Walker suggests that Constantine's agenda was clear, "needing symbols to unite this new era, there was great attraction in bringing Jerusalem back onto the stage of imperial history, rescuing it from the oblivion to which his imperial predecessors had hoped to confine it."[7] In Constantine's corner eventually emerged the able Cyril who served as Bishop of Jerusalem from 348-384. In spite of the

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2004), 74. John Wilkinson, *Jewish Holy Places and the Origins of Christian Pilgrimage* in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert Ousterhout (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 43-44.

[6] Wilkinson, *Jewish Holy Places and the Origins of Christian Pilgrimage* in *The Blessings of Pilgrimage*, ed. Robert Ousterhout (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 43-44.

[7] Walker, 77.

fact the city's centrality had been downplayed in Christian theology, Cyril promoted the view that Jerusalem was indeed a "holy city."[8]

Of course, there was reason enough to visit the city apart from its current celebrity. It was, after all, the land where Jesus walked, and there was much historical value because of its place in history. Nonetheless, Constantine and his mother did their part to enhance the city's visibility and prestige within the newly emerging Christendom. Although Emperor Hadrian had sought to convert Jerusalem to a fully Roman city by renaming it *Aelia Capitolina* in 135 and building pagan temples on the Temple Mount, Golgotha, and in Bethlehem, his efforts were self defeating in that they provided a historical link to Jewish and Christian pasts.[9] Representing the emperor and "in the splendor of imperial power," Helena made her way to Palestine, visiting the Holy Land, as well as cities and peoples throughout the East. She bestowed gifts upon people, released individuals from slavery, and dedicated churches. At age 80, she reportedly pursued her mission with youthful vigor before returning home and dying shortly thereafter. [10] Added to this was Constantine's ambitious building project that included basilicas over the graves of Peter and Paul in Rome, as well as tearing down the pagan facilities constructed under Hadrian and replacing them with Christian basilicas.[11] The

[8] Ibid., 78.

[9] James Vidal, *Pilgrimage in the Christian Tradition* in *Pilgrimage*, ed. by Virgil Elizondo and Sean Freyne (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 39 or *Concilium* (1996, no 4).

[10] As discussed in Ousterhout, , *Hadrian and St. Helena: Imperial Travel and the Origins of Christian Holy Land Pilgrimage*, 74.

[11] Vidal, 41.

activity of the royal family naturally succeeded in bringing Jerusalem to the fore in Christian thinking and imagination.

Also of note among early pilgrims is the Spanish nun Egeria. Her motives for pilgrimage were doubtfully tempered by political aspirations as she sought eagerly to learn from those who lived in the lands where God had so powerfully and definitively made himself known. George Gingras eloquently describes Egeria's purpose as "to vivify and confirm her faith in the truths of Scripture through personal contact with those places marked by the action of God on man, and to meet and pray in the company of those who she considered best exemplified the Christian life, the monks of Sinai, Palestine, Mesopoatamia, and Isauria."[12] Egeria, motivated by more than merit or conquest, set herself toward knowing and worshiping the God who had revealed himself to humankind.

Indeed, Pilgrimage for Egeria was more than just visiting physical sites. It was about joining with the community of the saints who dwelt in the lands where God had revealed himself. Her vivid geographical descriptions are equaled, if not surpassed, by her reports of the spiritual practices of the journey and of the practices of those she met along the way. She described their ritual of reading the Scriptures that fitted the sites visited: "For this was always very much our custom, that, whenever we should come to places that I had desired to visit, the proper passage from Scripture would be read."[13] She likewise embraced and praised the hospitality she received, "The holy monks [at Mount Nebo] consented to receive us very hospitably, and they permitted us even to come into

[12] George Gingras, trans., *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* in *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. by Johannes Quasten, Walter Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler (New York: Newman Press, 1970), 19.

[13]Egeria, 54.

greet them. When we entered their cells and after we prayed with them, they graciously gave us gifts, for they are in the habit of bestowing gifts on those on whom they receive hospitality."[14] Egeria, then, celebrated with the church universal and went on to immerse herself in the religious practices of Jerusalem, learning from their customs.

James Vidal suggests that the influence of such pilgrims was transformational for the life of the church. "The influence of returning pilgrims – many of them bishops or influential clergy – soon led to the adoption of many of these liturgical customs in the churches of both East and West, one example being the custom of reading scriptural passages appropriate to the feasts at the eucharist and liturgy of the hours, instead of using *lectio continua*."[15] In short, the example of Egeria illustrates how influential and meaningful a pilgrimage to Palestine could be for Christians after Constantine. An opportunity to learn from both geography and the community of faith would continue to draw pilgrims throughout the coming Medieval era.

The exercise did not go without debate even in its earliest expressions, however. Gregory of Nyssa, for example, did not yield to the notion that the altars in Jerusalem were any holier than the ones in Cappadocia.[16] Augustine intoned that since "God is everywhere, we cannot approach God by moving our feet, but only by moving our hearts."[17] Though the point was taken that God was indeed an omnipresent God, many still found value in a journey to the lands where the prophets and Christ himself had

[14] Ibid., 67,

[15] James Vidal, 40.

[16] Wilkinson, 42.

[17] Vidal, 36.

walked. Jerome held that, "One understands holy scripture better when one has seen with one's own eyes Judaea and contemplated the ruins of its ancient cities."[18] Accordingly, Leo commented, "A person there is taught to understand the power of the gospel, not only by the written words but by the witnesses of the places themselves… Why is the understanding in difficulty when the eyes are its instructors? And why are things read or heard doubtful where all the mysteries of man's salvation obtrude themselves upon the sight and touch?"[19] In short, early pilgrimages served to bolster faith through a hands-on education as well as through the communities of faith that persisted in such historic places. These places, of course, were not limited to Palestine as the celebration revolving around Polycarp shows. Pilgrimage to both the Holy Land and to local shrines venerating the saints would become popular in Medieval Europe.

Three things seem to have shaped the evolution of pilgrimage and pilgrimage destinations over the course of the Middle Ages. First, Rome's association with the Apostles Peter and Paul was well established by the fourth century. This combined with the city's historic centrality in the political affairs of the Mediterranean world to make it a place of supreme importance. Indeed, by the fourth century, Rome was on par with Jerusalem as a pilgrimage destination. Second, the fall of Christian Palestine to Muslim rule in 638 A.D. made pilgrimage to the Holy Land more dangerous, making pilgrimages to the Holy Land a tricky business throughout the Middle Ages. Pope Urban II and his call for the crusades reinvigorated interest in pilgrimage to Jerusalem and its environs for

[18] Jerome, as quoted in J. G. Davies, *Pilgrimage Yesterday and Today* (London: SCM Press, 1988), 9.

[19] Ibid., 9

a variety of reasons, but the short lived military success meant that Christians travelling there did so under varying conditions of hostility and hospitality.[20] Finally, the connection of pilgrimage with indulgences prompted many a pilgrimage to various sites where the devout could venerate regional saints. Tombs of saints like Martin and Denys in France, Cuthbert and Thomas of Canterbury in England, and Francis in Italy all became well established places of pilgrimage. Remains of saints that had rested in Muslim controlled lands often were stolen away and brought to the European continent. St. Mark's remains, for example, found their way from Alexandria to Venice. Besides Jerusalem, however, Rome and Santiago de Compostela, housing the tomb of St. James, were the most popular pilgrimage sites.[21]

Motivation for and understanding of pilgrimage in the Middle Ages retained historic precedent while also taking on new elements, particularly in the sense of the eternal benefits that could be gained. Generally speaking, life in the Middle Ages was conceived of as a pilgrimage. "People are summoned to organize their lives as if they were on a journey to the heavenly Jerusalem where reunion with God awaits them in the Kingdom about which so many Christians sources speak. To make an actual pilgrimage to a holy place was to make concrete these ideas about life being a pilgrimage."[22] In this sense, physical pilgrimage was not mere metaphor, and though spiritual journeys were not obligatory, the evolving system of indulgences created an avenue whereby pilgrims

[20] Jan Van Herwaarden, *Between Saint James and Erasmus: Studies in Late-Medieval Religious Life: Devotion and Pilgrimage in the Netherlands*, trans. by Wendie Shaffer and Donald Gardner (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 211-212. Vidal, 40-41.

[21] Vidal, 41-42.

[22] Van Herwaarden, 125.

would not only be blessed in this life for their pilgrimage but would be rewarded in the life to come as well. This development more than hints at the problem Luther would have with the practice as the medieval era waned and the modern world was coming to life.

Still, a host of motivations prompted pilgrims. The twelfth-century *Book of Saint James* spells out the most idealistic vision for pilgrimage in an extended passage:

> Going on pilgrimage is a most excellent but also a difficult business, because for man the path to life is narrow, that to death, on the other hand, broad and spacious. The pilgrim's path is the strait and narrow path, (and means) the disappearance of vices, the mortification of body, the revelation of virtues, the remission of punishments, the penance of penitents, the path of the righteous, the love of the saints, the belief in the resurrection and the reward of the blessed, namely the delivery from hell and mercy from heaven. Pilgrimage diminishes (the appetite for) sumptuous food, restrains gluttony, tames lust and suppresses bodily desires which are in conflict with (the salvation of) the soul, purifies the spirit, causes the person to reflect, humbles the proud, makes the meek blessed, loves poverty, hates wealth which is guarded by greed but loves generosity which slakes needs, rewards those who practice abstinence and perform good works, but does not in itself save sinners and the avaricious.[23]

More simply, Van Herwaarden writes, "The pilgrims are emancipated from their daily existence: *Pilgerfahrt macht frei*… A pilgrim's departure signified that they had relinquished house and home, left all that was familiar, and set outwards the unknown, the new, the different, whatever that might be."[24] The freedom of pilgrimage made the pilgrim free indeed.

In this context, Davies distinguishes four types of pilgrimages practiced in the Middle Ages: 1) Exilic Pilgrimages-which understood that the Christian life was a life of exile (Heb 11:13; 1 Pet 2:11) and was unorganized in that God would lead where he

[23] As quoted by Van Herwaarden, 130.

[24] Van Herwaarden, 132.

wished; 2) Penitential Pilgrimages-in which penitence was made or indulgences sought (this type of pilgrimage, Davies contends, helped raise the status of Rome as a pilgrimage destination); 3) Judicial Pilgrimages-which were ordered as punishment for a crime (which were often a means of enforcing the exile of an individual); 4) and the Crusades-which were aimed at reclaiming sacred sites from the hands of the Islamic infidel.[25] Unofficially, motives for pilgrims varied. Van Herwaarden more simply suggests the system of indulgences, quests for physical and mental healing, penance, self-discovery, and simple wanderlust and curiosity about the world all enticed would-be pilgrims.[26]

Regardless of motivation, pilgrimage in the Middle Ages could be as difficult as life itself. Before departure, pilgrims attended services for blessings in which they would prostrate themselves before the altar of their church and have a selection from the Psalms of Ascent (120-134) read over them. They would then have a pouch and staff, as symbols of faith and hope, blessed formally. The staff also served as a third leg and symbolized the Trinity, but more practically it was useful as a weapon against evil, particularly in the form of bandits and wild animals. Indeed, pilgrimages were fraught with dangerous possibilities. Difficult geographic terrain, shipwrecks, sickness, physical exhaustion, pirates, and other marauders were all frequent challenges once the pilgrim left home. Frequently, then, people would band together for protection and mutual support for pilgrimages. With such a host of motivations and potential dangers, pilgrimages were easily criticized for the mistreatment of women, whoredom, smuggling, and even spying. Immorality, in other words, frequently accompanied the pilgrim in their travels and, as

[25] Davies, 13-18.

[26] Van Herwaarden, 138-142.

Luther so vividly recounted, at their destinations. Indeed, the practice of pilgrimage was no easy burden or always an honest one either.[27]

These kinds of concerns naturally fueled further the theological apprehensions Reformers like Luther had with pilgrimage. Nonetheless, "Beginning as early as the second century CE and continuing through another dozen centuries, pilgrimage has been a significant part of the Christian religious experience… Pilgrimage enriched the life of the medieval citizenry, individually and in the aggregate: in economy, in understanding geography, in literature, art, architecture, music, in meeting with other cultures, in judicial processes, even in the naming of family members and streets."[28] Of course, to discern how Protestants today might understand pilgrimage, it is important to look beyond the Medieval world to Reformation-era thinkers.

Theological Reflections: An Overview of Reformation Teachings on Pilgrimage

"All pilgrimages ought to be stopped,"[29] intoned an indignant Martin Luther. In his sentiments on pilgrimage, one can hear the cantankerous grumblings of the reformer as he ranted against the corrupted practices of his day. Luther's own spiritual journey prompted an obsession with anything that hinted at works righteousness, which quickly raised the ire of the Reformation's prime instigator. Of those exercises, Luther found suspect the honored practice of pilgrimage. His own journey to Rome contributed to a

[27] Davies, 46-49. Van Herwaarden, 150, 181.

[28] Linda Kay Davidson and Maryjane Dunn-Wood, *Pilgrimage in the Middle Ages: A Research Guide* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 4.

[29] Martin Luther, *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings,* ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor Books, 1962), 444.

negative critique of spiritual travel, and his harsh view of the practice resulting from his experience has certainly colored the role of pilgrimage in Protestant traditions. It is a view, however, that that should not be oversimplified and must be considered in its own historical context.

Just as Luther followed in the footsteps of the likes of Wyclif and Hus in disputing many Roman practices, so he echoed their concerns about pilgrimage. Wyclif, acknowledging God's omnipresence, regarded pilgrimage as "blind" since Christ can take away sins from anywhere. Hus was not as vehement on the matter, but opposed the sale of indulgences (though not necessarily indulgences themselves) and felt relics to be unauthentic. In this vein, he discouraged pilgrimage.[30]

Luther too had much to be concerned about when it came to the practice. When given the chance to make the trip to Rome in 1510, he welcomed the opportunity. In fact, Roland Bainton describes Luther's attitude as that of a pilgrim who upon first sight of the city cried out, "Hail, holy Rome!"[31] Nonetheless, Luther quickly learned there was much unholy in the Christian capital, especially regarding clerical immorality and irreverence. Still, he enjoined the pilgrim practices but found no satisfactory relief for his own wearied soul.[32] From Luther's perspective, the whole business of pilgrimage was just that—a business. He came to see pilgrimage as theatrics driven by a corruptive greed, commenting:

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[30] Davies, 89.

[31] Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 37.

[32] Ibid., 37-38.

> The miracles that happen in these places prove nothing, for the evil spirit can also work miracles, as Christ told us in Matthew 24[:24]. If they took the matter seriously and forbade this sort of thing, the miracles would quickly come to an end… But what shall I say now? Every bishop thinks only of how he can set up and maintain such a place of pilgrimage in his diocese. He is not at all concerned that the people believe and live aright… In fact, where pilgrimages do not catch on, they set to work to canonize the saints, not to honor the saints, who would be honored enough without being canonized, but to draw the crowds and bring in the money. At this point pope and bishops lend their aid. There is a deluge of indulgences. There is always money enough for these. But nobody worries about what God has commanded.[33]

Here Luther not only chastises clerical avarice but he also discounts the miraculous feats as the work of the devil, maintaining they were tolerated solely for monetary gain. Specifically, Luther attacks the selling of indulgences, a practice closely linked with pilgrimage, forcefully reminding the reader that a holy God cannot be bought and that the commands of God should not be neglected in hopes of buying off the Almighty.

Luther's concern with pilgrimage extended beyond the issue of the indulgence though. In a sermon on the Gospel of John, he wrote:

> Here we could enlarge on the villainy of the popes, the orders, and the congregations – the villainy which lured us to Rome, Compostela, and Jerusalem, thinking up one pilgrimage after another. This is where the people were to go and pray, just as though we could not find God at home, in our bedroom or wherever we happened to be. God is no longer confined to one place as He was when He chose to dwell in Jerusalem before the advent of the true temple, Christ the Lord… For if Christ is sitting at the right hand of His Father, why, then, should we seek Him in Rome, in Compostela, in Aachen, or at the Oak? You will not find God there; you will find the devil. For God will not let Himself be found in a place of our own choice and choosing.[34]

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[33] Martin Luther, *The Christian in Society, To the Christian Nobility*, vol. 44 of *Luther's Works* (Philadephia: Fortress Press, 1986), 186.

[34] Martin Luther, *Sermons on the Gospel of John 1-4*, vol. 22 of *Luther's Works*, 249-250.

Luther's antagonism of all things connected with the papacy is apparent in this passage that reminds the reader of the foolishness of limiting a ubiquitous God to a particular locale. Evident too is a concern with the sovereignty of God who cannot be bound by human doings. God, Luther affirms, makes himself known when and where he wills. He is not limited to particular physical spaces and so should not be sought via pilgrimage, which would be to limit God. In short, Luther argued God is not a God bound by geography and should be sought wherever the Christian is. To go to a special place is to seek God not on his terms but on humanity's. This, he characteristically and unapologetically charged, was of the devil.

Luther did, however, offer those seeking God the more convenient and sound route of seeking him in the sacraments. Although he could not tolerate a practice that hinted God might be limited by place, Luther did believe that Christ's presence was promised in the sacrament of communion. In a chastising tone, he suggested:

> Remember how, previously, you ran to see the graves of the saints, their clothes, and their bones? Do you recall how eagerly pilgrimages were made to Rome, to Jerusalem, to St. James, only to see a stone, a bone, wood, and earth, and nothing was thought of Christ? And here in your city or village, in front of your door, Christ himself is present with his body and blood, with his remembrance, alive to receive praise and glory, and you do not desire to go there and to assist in giving thanks and praise? You are surely not a Christian, not even a human being, but a devil or the devil's servant.[35]

In other words, Luther felt the frustration of those doing the hard, and useless, work of pilgrimage, when Christ himself was being neglected. Why travel to find the grace of Christ when one might simply embrace the Christ of the Sacrament?

[35] Martin Luther, *Word and Sacrament*, vol. 38 of *Luther's Works*, 109-110.

Luther could embrace pilgrimage as a term used metaphorically. From his *Table Talk*, we learn:

> In former times saints made many pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, and Compostella in order to make satisfaction for sins. Now, however, we can go on true pilgrimages in faith, namely, when we diligently read the psalms, prophets, gospels, etc. Rather than walk about holy places we can thus pause at our thoughts, examine our heart, and visit the real promised land and paradise of eternal life.[36]

In this sense, Luther recognized the Christian journey was a pilgrimage not to earthly cities but to eternity with Christ. The Scriptures become the vehicle by which the Christian goes on the true pilgrimage to "eternal life."

In spite of what he deemed as wasteful efforts and the unseemly nature of pilgrimage, on at least one occasion Luther hinted that there might be some value in an earthly, physical journey. Explaining the ninety-five theses, he commented that pilgrimages are rarely made for legitimate reasons, which implies they could be made for legitimate purposes. He proceeds, offering four criticisms and one potential reasonable motivation for the practice: 1) He suggests many make pilgrimage out of curiosity to "see and hear strange and unknown things." This he sees as stemming from boredom in worship services neglected in the pilgrim's home church, but with little tolerance for the pilgrim, he adds, "Furthermore, he would be closer to Christ and the saints if he were not so foolish as to prefer sticks and stones to the poor and his neighbors whom he should serve out of love. And he would be closer to Christ also if he were to provide for his own family." 2) He argues that pilgrimages are too often made for the sake of indulgences, which gain the pilgrim nothing at all. 3) Luther felt that laboring for one's sins was the

[36] Martin Luther, *Table Talk No 3588*, vol. 54 of *Luther's Works*, 238.

motivating factor for pilgrimage, which he considered evil and not good. 4) Finally, however, Luther suggested an honest reason for pilgrimage: "if one is singularly motivated by a devotion to honor the saints, the glory of God, and personal edification."[37] (A point to which we will later return.)

This final word on pilgrimage is hardly a ringing endorsement, but it does suggest that somewhere in Luther's psyche, there was the sense that traveling to visit the sites where God had revealed himself might have some value. Still, Luther is understandably associated with dismissing the practice as unhelpful, if not damning, to true faith and being truly faithful. A final quote against pilgrimages is rather poignant: "They are without value; no commandment enjoins them, and canonical obedience does not require them; nay, they give very frequent occasions for sin and for despising God's commandments."[38]

Luther, of course, was not the only Reformation-era critic of pilgrimage. John Calvin too continued the charge against pilgrimage from Geneva. Though not as bombastic as Luther, Calvin was equally repulsed by the practice, particularly from the perspective of the veneration of saints and images. He wrote, "When God is worshipped in images, when fictitious worship is instituted in his name, when supplication is made to the images of saints, and divine honours paid to dead men's bones, and other similar things, we call them abominations as they are."[39] Furthermore, like Luther and Hus

[37] Martin Luther, *Career of the Reformer: Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses, No 40*, vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*, 197-199.

[38] Luther in Dillenberger, 444.

[39] Davies, 101.

before him, he dismissed most relics as imitations at best and dangerous of inciting idolatry at worst. Naturally, pilgrimage to sites housing such relics would be an exercise in vanity.[40]

Calvin readily embraced, however, pilgrimage as a metaphor for the Christian life. He wrote in his *Institutes*, "For the same reason, he is said to have 'sealed us, and given the earnest of the Spirit in our hearts,' because, as pilgrims in the world, and persons in a manner dead, he so quickens us from above as to assure us that our salvation is safe in the keeping of a faithful God. Hence, also, the Spirit is said to be 'life because of righteousness.'"[41]• Calvin is clear, though, pilgrims we may be, but we are not to make pilgrimage for the sake of worship. In a further chastisement, he asserts:

> Meanwhile, they [the Papists], allow the saints to be worshipped indifferently with God. What is it that the prophets everywhere condemn in the people of Israel, but just that they give incense to their idols, provide sacred feasts, pay gifts, dedicate altars, and prostrate themselves before them? In all these things the Papists go beyond the Israelites. For they kindle lamps and tapers at the dead images of the dead, sprinkle incense, celebrate their memory in solemn feasts, place them on altars, make oblations to them, carry them about on their shoulders in procession, undertake long pilgrimages to visit them, bow down before them and pray to them.[42]

Finally, Protestants were not the only to dismiss pilgrimage as absurd. Erasmus of Rotterdam also joined the chorus criticizing the practice. Not as extreme in his critique as Luther or Calvin, Erasmus still recognized the heart of the issue. He felt dismissing the statues and relics would do more harm than good, acquiescing they be kept for this

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[40] Ibid., 101.

[41] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Trans. by Henry Beveridge. (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 350.

[42] John Calvin, *John Calvin: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1975), 133-134.

reason. True to his age, he unsurprisingly testified, "If someone shows us the robe that Christ wore, or one of his footprints, we kneel and kiss it. But even were you to produce every garment he ever wore and all the furnishings of his mother's house there is nothing that presents the person Christ more vividly, more effectively and more completely, than the writings of the Evangelists and the Apostles."[43] It was to the Book that Erasmus directed the pilgrim.

Ultimately, Erasmus was concerned with the excesses of pilgrims while on their excursion, as well as the reward system of pilgrimage. Though he did not condemn it when it was done in sincerity, he questioned the ostentatious show, warning against superfluous expressions of faith. Instead, he encouraged internalization and quiet submission. Penance, confession, and repentance remained at the heart of his system, things that did not require pilgrimage. He too condemned those who promoted pilgrimage for the sake of their own profit. In short, he simply questioned why one would venerate relics from Paul and not read his epistles.[44]

These comments withstanding, pilgrimage was a practice long before Luther and other reform-minded individuals chose to repudiate it, and, to be sure, pilgrimage continued to be practiced informally and formally in the post-Reformation era and continues today. It is only fair to Reformation-era thinkers and to contemporary would-be pilgrims, to understand sixteenth century critiques of the practice in light of their own context. Indeed, with the variety of abuses plaguing Christendom at the time, it is not unexpected that this practice too did not go uncorrupted and therefore unchallenged.

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[43] Erasmus of Rotterdam as quoted in Van Herwaarden, 189.

[44] Van Herwaarden, 189-195.

Regarding superstition and abuse of the practice, it can be said that similarities certainly occur in modern-day pilgrimage as well. Nonetheless, abuse of what is good does not make what is good inherently wrong and so the practice persists as a helpful discipline for growing in faith. Concerning why the lure of pilgrimage has continued to be so strong, in spite of the war waged on it by the Reformers, Charles Foster simply and rightly affirms, "You can't root out something so fundamental to human identity." [45] This, then, is much the concern of this project. Can the practice of pilgrimage be recaptured for contemporary spiritual edification and specifically so for the people of St. John's?

A Practice for Today: The On-going Custom of Pilgrimage

In light of the conflict over Christian pilgrimage, it is appropriate to return to Reformation era condemnations. Concern with the deviant moral practices often associated with pilgrimage was legitimate, particularly the connection between pilgrimage and indulgences.[46] This latter malfeasance, Luther and others knew, was antithetical to the gospel of grace. No merit could be gained regarding salvation by traveling to distant lands or regional shrines. Graham Tomlin rightly cites Luther as concerned that pilgrims would simply miss God while looking for him in Rome or Compostela and miss the Gospel while looking for him in indulgences.[47]

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[45] Foster, 15.

[46] Luther also recognized that money spent on pilgrimages was money not spent on family needs and within one's own region. He too took note the financial foul play that took place in pilgrimage centers.

[47] Graham Tomlin, *Protestants and Pilgrimage*, in Bartholomew and Hughes, 113.

In spite of the severe critiques, Luther did allow for the possibility of pilgrimage. Returning to his Explanations of the Ninety-Five Theses, we read that Luther found at least one honest reason for pilgrimage: "if singularly motivated by a devotion to honor the saints, the glory of God, and personal edification."[48] In light of the deluge of arguments proffered by Luther against pilgrimage, this is hardly a call to leave house and home for a weekend excursion, let alone a more involved expedition. In context, however, it is possible both to understand Reformation-era disregard for pilgrimage and still be open to the possibility of its relevance for Christians today.

The immediate aftermath of the Reformation nonetheless has been to impact Protestant stances toward pilgrimage. Local shrines in Protestant lands were naturally safeguarded from becoming the focus of religious devotion, cutting down on regional pilgrimages. Nonetheless, Davies recounts the telling experiences of Fynes Moryson (late 16th century) and William Lithgow (early 17th century) who both visited Rome and traveled on to Jerusalem. In spite of strong Protestant convictions, their responses to Jerusalem are important. Emphatic that he was not on pilgrimage, Moryson still penned a response worthy of the most exuberant pilgrim:

> I think it good to profess that by my journey to this City I had no thought to expiate any least sin of mine; much less did I hope to merit any grace from God… Yet I thought no place more worthy to be viewed in the whole world than this City, where howsoever I gave all divine worship to God, and thought none to be given to the places, yet I confess that (through the grace of God) the very places struck me with a religious horror, and filled my mind prepared to devotions with holy motions.[49]

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[48] Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, 197-199.

[49] As quoted in Davies, 123.

Lithgow similarly remarked, "At last we beheld the prospect of Jerusalem, which was not only a contentment to my weary body, but also being ravished with a kind of unwonted rejoicing, the tears gushed from my eyes for too much joy."[50] In these words we see clearly the power of place, as well as an ongoing tussle between a cerebral theology of God's omnipresence and heart-felt experience evoked by particular locales.

As time has passed, tensions Protestants have felt toward pilgrimage have waned. Chance archaeological discoveries in Egypt fueled the imagination of Londoners via publications by John Murray. By the 1830s the Near East was typically a part of upper class young men's grand tour, paving the way for visits to the Holy Land. Similarly, the advent of modern biblical criticism prompted further interest in biblical lands. Over the course of thirty-one years, beginning in 1869, Thomas Cook and Son escorted to the Holy Land approximately 12,000 individuals. Far from ascetical journeys and the difficulties faced in the Middle Ages, Cook's company ensured that the devotional side of these excursions did not go neglected, even as they provided appropriate accommodations for their guests.[51]

Similarly, local pilgrimages resurfaced in England in the late nineteenth century as a response to the need to reinvigorate and reestablish the importance of various cathedrals within the certain districts. Davies quotes one Cathedral Dean who felt, "The only hope of saving the Cathedral bodies is to make them once more part, and the highest

[50] Ibid., 123.

[51] Davies., 140-149.

chief part, of the great machinery of the Church in each diocese."[52] Services for children and choir festivals were held to engage the laity once again. Here we get a sense of the medieval concern for monetary gain, but debates arose, however, over how to ensure genuine pilgrimage verses tourism, indicating a genuine concern for parishioners' spiritual well being. Cathedrals, they maintained, were places to talk to God after all.[53]

Today a cursory search on the web for travel opportunities to Israel and Reformation sites indicates how strong the pilgrimage impulse remains in the twenty-first century. One wonders how Luther would respond to his theological descendants paying homage to their spiritual father by visiting Eisleben, Erfurt, Wittenberg, Worms, the Wartburg, and other locales the great reformer made infamous. With pilgrimage booming as a spiritual discipline and a business, it is appropriate to examine next what basis there might be for a continued practice today.

[52] As quoted in Davies, 153.

[53] Davies, 153-154, 156.

PART THREE

MINISTRY STRATEGY

CHAPTER 6

IDENTITY NOW: DISCOVERING WHO WE ARE THROUGH PILGRIMAGE

A lack of historical and theological knowledge of the congregation's tradition is the primary consideration for suggesting pilgrimage might be beneficial for St. John's. It is knowledge the church would do well to recover to give vision for the present and future of the church. St. John's is likely not alone is this deficiency. Philip Sheldrake correspondingly recognizes a broader sense of identity-displacement in the culture at large. He alleges there is, "… a crisis of place in Western societies – a sense of rootlessness, dislocation or displacement. Part of this crisis is cultural. At its root lies a decline in traditional systems of values and symbols – religious, ethical, and social. The resulting fragmentation tends, among other things to inhibit a clear world-view."[1] This affirms the assertion above that members of St. John's are likely not alone in their inability to express meaningfully their identity as shaped by their past. Likewise, Sheldrake's words confirm the need of St. John's and other congregations to engage

[1] Philip Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred: Place, Memory, and Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 2.

seriously their identity and outlook. Indeed, pilgrimage, an uprooting experience in itself, is paradoxically one means by which individuals can better understand who they are and become better grounded in their faith journey.

I Once Was Lost But Now I'm Found: Pilgrimage as Discipline and Means of Discovery

A variety of factors clarify the role the practice can play in spiritual formation. The history of pilgrimage itself, for example, indicates there is merit in traveling to the places where God has worked in particularly inspiring ways. Indeed, it seems from the beginning of Christianity there was an inherent impulse to do so. The examples cited in chapter five from the era prior to Constantine, including the veneration of martyr's tombs and the existence of churches on sights like Golgotha, the Mount of Olives, and in Bethlehem are telling. The continuance of the practice after Constantine is equally telling because Christians have consistently been drawn to walk the grounds on which Jesus walked and to see the historic grounds of his ministry. To be sure, the pilgrimage impulse continued for Catholics and Protestants alike in spite of warnings against them from both parties. Egeria's journal is particularly helpful, because her musings reflect a simpler and less controversial pursuit. Though others like Luther were less than gracious toward the practice, Egeria remains a positive example of pilgrimage, particularly in terms of experiencing the people of places in hopes of knowing more deeply the Infinite.

History, then, suggests Christians in every generation have found value in pilgrimage. Though the study of the past is a reminder of the corruptibility of pilgrimage, it is a matter of course that the corruption of humanity and human endeavors prompted

the ministry of Christ. However, because of the redemptive work of Jesus, Christians can engage practices like pilgrimage, trusting he can and does use them according to his glory.

Christian George in *Sacred Travels* helps put the pilgrimage impulse into perspective in light of Luther's historic rediscovery of grace. He writes,

> Pilgrimage belongs to the deepest impulse of the evangelical tradition—reformation. A medieval theology incorrectly viewed pilgrimage as credits to a purgatory account—the more trips you take, the less time you bake. However the grace-based theology rediscovered by Martin Luther and the other Reformers revises our understanding of pilgrimage as a discipline of sanctification, not justification. Pilgrimage does not save us. Rather, it is a grace that reminds us that salvation is a journey with Christ as our guide and heaven our goal.[1]

So rather than engaging in a merit earning venture, hoping to earn God's favor, George suggests that pilgrimage encourages spiritual growth as a means of transformation for those who venture out on physical journeys to understand more deeply that which God has done. George concludes his work, insisting on the educational value of such travels. "Informed by other cultures' customs and creeds, pilgrimage expands our knowledge of God and increases our appreciation for the spiritual disciplines. Giving flexibility to the often stiff body of Christ, it allows the hands of God to touch the feet of God so we may stretch and run together with perseverance the race marked out for us. To this end, Jesus's prayer for unity—'that they may be one' (John 17:11)—is fulfilled."[2]

J.G. Davies similarly concludes his discussion of pilgrimage, reflecting on its nature and value. He writes:

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[1] Christian George, *Sacred Travels: Recovering the Ancient Practice of Pilgrimage* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 16.

[2] Ibid., 168,

> When Christians visit those sites where the founder of their religion or some of its outstanding followers were active, they realize the world-wide character of the church… It follows that a pilgrimage is not simply about places but about people; it is not only looking at stones and hills and valleys but encountering others and interacting with them… The possibility of coming together with those who belong to denominations other than one's own and also with believers in the locality visited has played an important role in the re-emergence of Protestant pilgrimages.

Echoing Egeria's heart for pilgrimage, he suggests pilgrimage is much about relationships—a Christian's relationship with God, with geography, with human endeavors, and with the larger body of Christ itself. Beyond the corruption of pilgrimage in the Medieval world, in other words, is a world of possibilities in which Protestants might grow from the practice of pilgrimage.

Indeed, humans have a need for connection beyond one's self, and pilgrimage seems to be a universal means to find that connection. David Carrasco affirms this notion, writing, "The human need to leave home, travel to a sacred place in order to establish ties with sacred beings, gain physical and spiritual healing, and receive new knowledge so that life can be renewed is a fundamental dimension of religious life."[3] Charles Foster makes an even more straightforward assessment of the compulsion to pilgrimage, citing a basic biological rationale: "Humans were designed to be walkers."[4] Pilgrimage he asserts in simple term, "is a wandering after God… Christian pilgrimage can and should be a walk with Jesus."[5]

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[3] David Carrasco, *Those who Go on a Sacred Journey: The Shapes and Diversity of Pilgrimages*, in Elizondo and Freyne, 13.

[4] Foster, 2.

[5] Ibid., xv.

Wright offers additional insight into how Protestants might consider pilgrimage as an exercise today. First, he affirms there has been historically a "non-consideration" of it among Protestants because of its historic connection with relics, works, and the like. Second, he affirms how his own consideration of pilgrimage was born first out of experience. About sensing God's presence in particular places, he writes, "The only answer I have to this day is that when God is known, sought and wrestled with in a place, a memory of that remains, which those who know and love God can pick up."[6] In sum, he suggests three values for pilgrimage today: 1) Education-within the teaching ministry of the church, there is an advantage to seeing things spoken of. 2) Prayer-pilgrimage experiences prompt the pilgrim to a deeper prayer life. 3) Discipleship-pilgrimage provides an invitation to delve deeper into the life of faith.[7]

Vest affirms the educational purpose. Noting that "an important mark of pilgrimage is its quest for something that is revered and sacred,"[8] he ruminates, "Going to an unfamiliar location may provide new perspectives about the world, which in turn helps us to feel that we have entered something new what we shall continue to experience."[9] Vest reminds us too that pilgrimage engages not only the mind and heart but also the body. Pilgrimage is a journey of the whole person. He submits, "The path of pilgrimage offers new settings that can stimulate us, make us more alert and open to wonder,

[6] Wright, 5.

[7] Ibid., 9-10.

[8] Vest, 30

[9] Ibid., 30

fascination, and awe."[10] There is, in his assessment, an interaction of "out there" and "in here", of both an outward and an inward journey. These most basic reasons for pilgrimage can be summed up by saying pilgrimage provides a learning opportunity for Christians that engages heart, mind, and body in the spiritual quest.

In conclusion it is important to note historical contexts shape all human understandings. Luther's musings on the subject in particular are telling of how personal experience and real abuses might negatively color our thinking. Is pilgrimage, then, a helpful practice, enriching the faith of a believer? Or is it a detrimental distraction, enticing the Christian to think God is not equally present in Rome, Georgia as he in Rome, Italy? To this question, a comment from Wright is appropriate: "Come see the place must be balanced with he is not here, he is risen."[11] And for those who embrace the call to come and see, knowing full well he is not here or there only, pilgrimage provides opportunity for learning, growth, and celebrating one's past, present, and future. As Foster proposes, "Pilgrimage is a journey back. It can give us new eyes—the eyes of children. And that's just as well, because only those who come as children can enter that strange kingdom. Children's eyes see color and significance where we see only grays and emptiness. Pilgrims are dancing, delighting children."[12]

[10] Vest, 4.

[11] Ibid., 8.

[12] Foster, xvi.

Finding Our Way

Sweet proposes (as noted in Chapter 3) there are "Two key questions for life: Do you know who you are? Do you know where you are?"[13] Thus far, this project has examined in very broad terms the histories of Cullman and St. John's, as well as the theological influences that have exerted themselves over the congregation. It has also examined Christian pilgrimage and proposed that it is one means for congregants to increase their understanding of their identity as Christians and members of St. John's. Much of this has helped locate St. John's in its current context but it has not resolved what that identity is in a way that is easy to understand and articulate. In other words, this project has laid a foundation as to "where" the congregation is in space and time but must further refine "who" the members of St. John's are. The two following sections offer a brief synopsis about the identity of the members of St. John's as Christians and as a congregation.

Who We Are in Christ

As Christians and as part of the one, holy, catholic church, members of St. John's individually share an identity in Christ that is the same for all Christians. This identity, of course, is paramount and is the foundation from which any other sense of self or corporate identity can be derived. Created by God and made in his image (Gn 1:26), humankind is God's special creation, uniquely made to honor, glorify, and commune with him. Unfortunately, it is not an image gone untarnished. Genesis 3 describes a disobedient humanity, reporting how Adam and Eve sought God-likeness by eating of the

[13] Sweet, 1-2.

tree of knowledge of good and evil while in a garden paradise. In Romans the Apostle Paul speaks to the universality of human sinfulness, writing, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). In spite of a sinful, fallen condition, Christians are nevertheless able to boast of a newly found identity in Christ. The Beloved Disciple of the New Testament offers two helpful identifiers. First he describes Christians as children of God. In his first letter, he champions the love of God and boldly asserts the Christian's identity as child of God, writing, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 Jn 3:1). But John informs us Christians are more than children, describing the faithful also as friends of God. He records in his gospel Jesus's intimate words with the disciples in his last hours, "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15:15). The Christian, John teaches, celebrates a status of child and friend.

This identity is born out of nothing less than the reconciling work of Jesus on the cross. Indeed, Paul tells us that it was God "who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18-19). In Christ, then, the Christian is one who is reconciled and is to proclaim the message of reconciliation that comes through Christ. To be reconciled is to be forgiven and to be made right or justified before God. Accordingly, Paul wrote to the Ephesians that in Christ "we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding" (Eph 1:7-8). That redemptive

forgiveness means that the Christian can stand before God justified and righteous before the Almighty. Whereas Paul opined the sinfulness of all humanity in Romans 3, he intoned in the same passage there is a "righteousness from God" that "comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Rom 3:22), and just as all have sinned, falling short of God's glory, so all are "justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (3:24). Paul continues his discussion of the Christian's righteousness in chapter four, citing the example of Abraham who believed God and whose faith "was credited to him as righteousness" (4:1).

Reconciled, forgiven, and righteous before God, the Christian, a friend and child of God, can be described in other ways as well. The believer can also classify himself or herself in Christ as "a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Cor 5:17). More poignant for this project, however, is the metaphor already introduced, namely that of pilgrim. The sense that Christians are pilgrims is born out of a new kind of citizenship, one that Paul reminds us is "in heaven" (Phil 3:20). It is appropriate here to revisit Hebrews 11 because the composer of the homily reminds us that as people of faith Christians have also taken up the identity of their spiritual forebears. "And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them" (Heb 11:13-16). It is this classification as pilgrim, as an

alien and stranger awaiting a heavenly city, that enables the Christian to live out joyfully and purposefully the life of one justified before God.

Who We Are at St. John's

Thus far this project has commented extensively on the context St. John's must navigate in terms of local history, its contemporary setting, its ecclesial past, and its theological tradition. A concise, summation of characteristics or a singular identification statement that can help the congregation better identify itself, however, is still lacking. In recent years, St. John's has been described as a "community church" and a "Jesus church." Both of these statements are surprisingly appropriate in light of the church's history and heritage, verified in the analysis of this project. On the one hand, St. John's was the first church of Cullman and its name, First Evangelical Protestant Church, conveyed a broadly Christian approach to the faith, making "community church" an apt designation. On the other hand, St. John's celebrates the work of Christ as the sole means of salvation, making "Jesus church" an equally fitting description. Neither explanation, however, provides a definitive sense of who St. John's is in comparison to other congregations or who it is in its own mind. Five areas of particular significance can be highlighted to help locate St. John's within the context of the larger Christian tradition. The final statement reflects a characteristic of the congregation that is not as overtly theological, but is included here because it represents one of the great strengths of St. John's.

St. John's is a church of the Reformation. In other words, the general tenets proclaimed by sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation begun in Germany are guiding

principles today. Scripture is the final authority in matters of life and faith. Grace is God's gift to redeem sinners via the atoning death and resurrection of Jesus. Faith, that is trust, is the only appropriate response granting any individual access to this grace.

St. John's is a sacramental church. Although Scripture might be the final authority for life and faith, Christians find themselves at odds on what those Scriptures mean or how they are to be interpreted. Based on the Catechisms used (and endorsed by the constitution of the church), St. John's believes Baptism and Communion are sacraments, outward symbols of an inward grace. In other words, we affirm these two activities were instituted by Christ in command and example and that he manifests his presence in a special way to communicate his grace and mercies to a fallen creation.

St. John's is an ecumenically-minded church. Based on the founding nomenclature of St. John's, its history of ecclesiastical affiliations, its current congregational status as member of the EARCCC, and its adoption and use of ecumenically-oriented catechisms like the Evangelical Catechism and Heidelberg Catechism, St. John's embraces as brothers and sisters all those who confess the Lordship of Jesus Christ. A further reflection of this is the incorporation of the Apostles' Creed in worship, signifying a broad confessional stance instead of a narrow denomination-based affirmation.

St. John's is a liturgically-oriented church. Though worship at St. John's ranges from formal to informal and from reflective to celebratory, much of the church year is both remembered and celebrated. Although each liturgical season is not recognized with equal enthusiasm, the church calendar, particularly the seasons of Advent and Lent,

shapes the life of the congregation. In this way, St. John's is and has been a liturgical church.

St. John's is a welcoming church. Most churches vary in their success at greeting, welcoming, and incorporating new members into their fellowship. In this sense, St. John's experiences the same frustrations and successes as do other congregations. However, as Christ welcomed all who would come to him, as trusting children or as broken, sinful adults, so St. John's receives individuals wherever they find themselves in their respective pilgrimage, inviting them to follow the one who is worthy of trust and able to heal.

Each of these categories reflects St. John's as it now exists. Because of its ecumenical outlook and lack of hierarchical affiliations, any of these attributes could change if the congregation is not diligent in assessing its identity in light of Scripture and its own tradition. We also note that although these descriptors or even a more concise statement might be important, for true depth of faith and lived faithfulness there is a greater need to understand the biblical and theological principles that shape those statements and who St. John's is and is called to be (as expounded in Chapter 4). Hence the call to pilgrimage is an opportunity to experience physically the places where the Christian faith as St. John's practices it has been shaped. Being able to repeat a list of descriptors, in other words, is not the same as understanding how those characteristics have shaped St. John's.

Walking Together

With a general framework in place that serves as a parameter for members to gain a better self understanding, it is imperative to lead them to that understanding. Studying and remembering the past, that is the congregation's history, becomes much of the goal of this project. For the membership of St. John's pilgrimage emerges as a most viable option to that end. The practice engages both the active and reflective side of human nature, as well as the propensity of the membership to travel. Pilgrimage, in short, is a most helpful option for spiritual formation.

Discovering Our Identity: Remembrance

Biblical reflections shaped our discussion in portions of both chapters four and five. Chapter 4 examined St. John's in light of the Scriptures and Chapter 5 considered how Holy Writ suggests the possibility of pilgrimage as spiritual practice. Similarly, the concept of remembrance should also be at least briefly considered. If pilgrimage is a journey into the past in hopes of discovering who one is and is to be as a Christian, then it is in part an exercise in remembrance. A biblically rooted understanding of remembrance, therefore, is important in establishing the viability of physical pilgrimage, while also serving as an important habit for the metaphorical pilgrimage all Christians make.

The God of the Old and New Testaments is not a being who stands impersonally beyond the realm of time and space with no interest in human affairs. Though transcendent and unbound by physical and temporal limitations, the God of the Scriptures is also immanent, present with us, and immersed in humanity's doings. He is a God who has made himself known in history through his chosen servants, Moses and the prophets,

his set-apart communities, Israel and the Church, the written word, and most notably through the Incarnation. Thus Christians know God as a self-revealing God because of his mission in and to the world, making the practice of remembrance fundamental to discerning God's presence and activity in life itself. A "spiritual habit of remembering" can therefore serve as a discipline to aid in the life of faith.[14]

The Bible speaks clearly and powerfully to the practice of remembrance as evoking a response and a way of acting. Joel Green describes the practice of biblical remembrance as having an "impetus for some response or action."[15] Likewise, Peter Craigie in his exposition of Deuteronomy, maintains that history can create a sense of immediacy in the life of God's covenant people. He writes:

> First, history was utilized to evoke memory; second, history served to produce vision and anticipation. That is to say history embraces both the past and the future, but is only critical for the present; memory of God's past course of action and anticipation of his future course of action provide the framework for the present commitment to God in the renewal of the covenant. History is thus one dimension of a continuing relationship between God and his people.[16]

Remembrance permeates both the Old and New Testaments. Celebrating his last Passover with the disciples and alluding to the fate that awaited him, Jesus broke bread, distributed it, and instructed the disciples to "do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19). Jesus prepared the disciples for future celebration of the great paschal lamb that would take place not only after a horrific sacrificial death but after a triumphant resurrection. The

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[14] Tom Schwanda (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, June 25, 2009).

[15] Joel Green, *The Gospel of Luke in The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 762.

[16] Peter Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy in The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdman's, 1976), 40.

disciples, in other words, were to commemorate the body and blood freely given by Christ as the ultimate soteriological event. Remembering the sacrifice of Christ would be the key to faithful kingdom living as the hope of redemption would be proclaimed. Thus, Green comments:

> We may understand Jesus as instructing his followers not only to continue sharing meals together, but to do so in a way that their fellowship meals recalled the significance of his own life and death in obedience to God on behalf of others. This recollection should have the effect of drawing forth responses reminiscent of Jesus' own table manners – his own openness to outsiders, his comportment as a servant, his indifference toward issues of status honor, and the like – so that these features of his life would come to be embodied in the community of those who call him Lord.[17]

The Passion, however, is not the only occasion in which the theme of remembrance surfaces in the Scriptures. Indeed, the call to remember the salvific acts of God is a thread that permeates the whole of the Christian Bible. The most poignant examples of remembrance in the Old Testament revolve around the Exodus and the giving of the Law, particularly as developed in the book of Deuteronomy. Preparing to recount the Law to the Israelites, the Deuteronomist articulates carefully the importance of remembering what God has done. He writes:

> Only be careful, and watch yourselves closely so that you do not forget the things your eyes have seen or let them slip from your heart as long as you live. Teach them to your children and to their children after them. Remember the day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, when he said to me, "Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children" (Dt 4:9-10).

Here Moses admonishes the Israelites not to "forget" what their own eyes have seen the Lord do for them and to "remember" how they obediently responded to his summons to stand before him at Horeb. This remembrance is no simple mental exercise. It is an act of

[17] Green,762.

the heart, involving the whole person. Remembrance, in other words, is not merely commemorating a date on a calendar but embracing with the mind, will, and emotions that which God has done. Craigie understands this remembrance thusly, "… for a people who knew their God through experience, the memory of that experience became a vital part of their religious life. Religious life did not consist, however, only in remembering the experience of God in the past; memory, rather functioned in order to produce the continuing obedience to the law of God, which in turn would lead to the continuing experience of the presence and activity of God."[18]

The writer continues, instructing the people to "Be careful not to forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you" (4:23), and adds an encouragement, as well, that God himself will be faithful to remembering his people. "For the LORD your God is a merciful God; he will not abandon or destroy you or forget the covenant with your forefathers, which he confirmed to them by oath" (4:31). The call to be a remembering people is modeled by God himself who remembers his covenants. Just as the writer instructs the Israelites to remember so he assures his readers that God himself is a God who remembers.

Having recounted the Ten Commandments to instruct the Israelites of their obligation to the Lord, Moses tells the people to talk with their children about these things and "Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Dt 6:8-9). Here Moses suggests the significance not only of remembering what God has already done, but of

[18] Craigie, 133.

instruction to make note of the ongoing acts of God for future remembrance and celebration.

The giving of the Law and its remembrance, of course, is born out of the Exodus itself. The biblical narrative recounts the calling out of a covenant people beginning with Abraham and continuing with his descendants Isaac and Jacob. The journey for survival to Egypt made by Jacob and his sons ironically results in slavery and bondage. God's calling of Moses to rescue his people climaxes in the mass flight of the Hebrews back to Canaan. Deuteronomy also commemorates this most significant journey of salvation as an event through which the LORD should be remembered: "be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (6:12). Likewise, preparing them for the conquest that is before them, Moses uses the Exodus illustration to exhort the people not to fear but to "remember well what the LORD your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt… The Lord your God will do the same to all the peoples you now fear" (Dt 18b, 19b). Thus the remembrance of what God has done not only provides an opportunity for thanksgiving but strength and courage for the future.

The Psalms extol these same themes in poetic fashion. Lamenting what he perceives to be the Lord's absence, the psalmist declares, "Then I thought, 'To this I will appeal; the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago" (77:11-12). His remembrance of God's work through Moses and Aaron (77:20) serves to comfort him in his own distress. Other psalms treat God's salvation more extensively. For example Psalm 78 recounts Israel's disobedience in the wilderness before celebrating God's faithfulness to Israel

through David. Psalms 105 and 106 delve explicitly into salvation history retelling how God redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt. In each case, the psalmist reminds the reader that God is to be celebrated for what God has done.

The New Testament letters affirm the need for remembrance as well. Paul instructs the Ephesian Christians to remember who they were so that they might know who they are, writing, "to remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world… But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ" (Eph 2:12-13). To Timothy Paul says, "Remember Jesus Christ" (2 Tm 2:8) and instructs him to "keep reminding" those under his charge of Christ's death and his benevolence toward us (2 Tm 2:11-14).

The New Testament also speaks of remembrance as mindfulness of contemporary and recent circumstances. For example, Paul encourages the Colossians to "Remember my chains" (4:18) so that they will be motivated to persevere in faith and pray for him. Likewise, to inspire confidence the author of Hebrews tells readers to "Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering" (Heb 10:32). He also appeals to the example of others, writing, "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith" (Heb 13:7).

Finally, Jesus's words in the Book of the Revelation offer a concluding indication of the significance of remembering for our faith. To the Church at Ephesus, Jesus says,

"Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rv 2:5). To the Church in Sardis, we read similarly in 3:3, "Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you." In both cases Jesus proclaims a need to repent in the context of remembering the grace they had received so that they might take present and future action to live again in accord with their former obedience.

These examples provide a biblical basis for the discipline of remembrance, a practice that challenges Christians to recall the story in such a way that it happens again.[19] In other words, through remembrance, believers can celebrate the powerful presence of God anew with great confidence. What, one might ask, constitutes a worthwhile remembrance? On the one hand, Christians should remember those actions spoken of specifically in the Scriptures because they are acts done on humanity's behalf. On the other hand, Christians should also embrace this call to remembrance more generally, applying it to the specific circumstances of their own lives. In other words, Christians are to take time to remember deliverance from personal Egypts, that is bondage, and they are to take time to remember God's blessings both obvious and subtle. In other words, Christians are to recall specifically not only how God has worked throughout human history, but also in their personal stories. Just as the great acts of salvation and God's faithfulness to Israel and the early Church are encouraging, so too is

[19] Tom Schwanda (lecture, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA, June 25, 2009).

God's past and ongoing activity in the individual's life. Believers are to carefully tend to those memories to gain confidence that God has been, enabling an ability to recognize more readily his on-going presence.

The Helpfulness of Pilgrimage for St. John's

This discussion of remembrance enhances the contention that pilgrimage is a beneficial practice for the members of St. John's. Beyond the biblical and theological mandate for the practice, however, are cultural factors asserting the same. What follows is a brief synopsis of those factors, illustrating why St. John's in particular should consider pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline. Inherent in these propositions is that pilgrimage would be beneficial both personally in discerning one's identity in Christ and corporately as a congregation.

As established in the Introduction, twenty-first century Americans live in a busy, leisure-filled culture. Likewise, the members of St. John's are active people who enjoy traveling or are willing to travel for a variety of experiences. Relatively well educated and capable of engaging the world intelligently, congregants will respond well to the experiences and learning opportunities provided by pilgrimage. Furthermore, past responses to opportunities to travel with fellow members have been successful. These have come in the form of overseas mission trips to Uganda and Kenya, as well as journeys South to Bolivia. Other local opportunities have been well received too. Similarly, participation in retreats and prayer retreats that required travel and overnight stays have been welcomed and embraced. In short, members have been willing to make financial and time commitments to participate in these kinds of endeavors.

Facets of the larger culture are also indicative of why members of St. John's will respond to the call to pilgrimage. Chapter 1 cited Evelyn Underhill's assessment that contemporary culture obsesses with wanting, having, and doing. Pilgrimage is very much a "doing" activity, appropriate for a culture bombarded with distractions of all sorts. Pilgrimage, however, is not just an activity of distraction but a kind of doing that can help the members of St. John's engage their being, learning what God intends for them and for his creation. Leonard Sweet's analysis in *Postmodern Pilgrims* is helpful too. In an image-craved culture, pilgrimage provides a prime opportunity to engage the sense of sight, as well as hearing, taste, touch, and smell. In other words, pilgrimage is a fully sensual endeavor in which God can engage believers through the created world. Similarly, pilgrimage is experiential and participatory. Pilgrimage calls individuals out of their mundane routine and challenges them to experience new worlds, new peoples, and new ways of doing things. In the process, pilgrims have opportunity to participate in new things. Finally, pilgrimage can take place in community. Shared experiences are often the grounds of fellowship and so such journeys of discovering provide occasion for church members not only to learn about their Christian tradition but to learn and experience the world in community, strengthening their connectedness for the on-going life of the church.

In short, members of St. John's have shown a readiness and desire to travel, and a willingness to make these kinds of experiences a priority. The congregation has demonstrated a desire for experiences different from the usual routine as a means of serving and deepening their faith in the context of their church community. Finally, the

biblical call to remember is universal and provides the framework which St. John's can engage in this spiritual discipline.

Leading Others to Understanding Who They Are

If the goal of Christian spirituality is the formation of Christ in the individual (Gal 4:19),[20] the role of the pastor, it follows, is to lead his or her congregation in this process of transformation. John Chrysostom, alluding to Jesus's own words (Mt 5:13-14), describes the spiritual responsibility of leadership, saying "The soul of the priest should shine like a light beaming over the whole world… Priests are the salt of the earth."[21] Salting lives and lighting paths, of course, are not easy tasks and they demand much time and sensitivity. To make matters more challenging, Scripture requires a character "above reproach" (1 Tm 3:2). Carl Volz states this plainly and succinctly, "A pastor whose life does not embody his teaching cannot expect any parishioner to take his advice seriously."[22]

Since the birth of the Church at Pentecost, the goal of the spiritual life and the responsibility of pastors have remained unchanged, though unique contexts command varying responses. Still, to know God, to worship and glorify him, and to be transformed to Christ's image all remain fundamental to Christian living. Pastors persist in the same basic responsibility of leading congregations by example in both word and deed down the

[20] Richard Averbeck, "Spirit, Community, and Mission: A Biblical Theology for Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 28.

[21] John Chrysostom in Philip Culbertson and Arthur Shippee, *The Pastor: Readings from the Patristic Period* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 1990), 184.

[22] Carl Volz, *Pastoral Life and Practice in the Early Church* (Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, 1990), 87.

pilgrim's path. This pilgrimage is metaphorical in general terms, related to a lifetime of faithful living and spiritual maturity, but it can also be a tangible, sensual exercise. The lived faith of St. John's as a congregation provides a foundation for metaphorical pilgrimage, as well as the practice of the physical discipline itself.

CHAPTER 7

PILGRIMAGE AND BEYOND: WHO WE ARE

The value of pilgrimage for the spiritual life has been established. That the residents of Cullman and the membership of St. John's particularly would benefit uniquely from pilgrimage has also been confirmed. The final concern, then, is to establish and actual pilgrimage plan. The final chapter of this project examines how best to navigate two thousand years of Christianity in a way that is meaningful for the congregation's life together and its future.

Pilgrimage at St. John's

The German Reformation heritage of St. John's has been emphasized as a primary influence on the congregation thus far. The reality, however, is that centuries of pre-Reformation Christianity have played into those Reformation influences. In other words, though understanding the German heritage of the congregation's founders and the German expressions of Christianity are necessary for understanding St. John's, the pre-Reformation manifestations of the faith are foundational too. Furthermore, the practice of pilgrimage itself can be enhanced when coupled with other disciplines. A comprehensive

pilgrimage strategy beyond this one ethnic influence, then, is in order for a more complete understanding of who St. John's is today.

The Long-Range Plan: From Jerusalem to St. John's

Brother Lawrence judges the most important practice of the spiritual life to be the "presence of God." This, he says, is, "to take pleasure in and become accustomed to His Divine company, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly in our hearts with Him at all times, and at every moment, especially in times of temptation, pain, spiritual dryness, revulsion to spiritual things, and even unfaithfulness and sin."[1] Within this context Christians engage in a number of exercises, what T.M. Moore refers to as the "disciplines of grace." This project endeavors to formulate a practice of the grace of pilgrimage in such a way as to enhance the faith and sense of identity of those in the St. John's community. The premise of this project has been the members of St. John's lack a credible and communicable understanding of who they are as a congregation. The proposal is that a series of pilgrimages, along with accompanying disciplines, can lead members to a meaningful understanding of their identity both as Christian pilgrims and members of St. John's. Because of time and financial constraints, these journeys should be made every other year or every three years. Though it is unrealistic to think that the same group of people will make every journey, it is intended for those who do make any portion of the journeys to share their experiences with others. It is hoped that through this process of traveling and sharing testimony with other segments of the congregation a

[1] Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, trans. Robert J. Edmonson (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1985), 125.

newly recovered sense of identity will provide a more faithful vision for the congregation's calling for the immediate and long-term future.

Because the Christian faith is born out of the self-revelation of God and the redemptive work of Christ, a pilgrimage to the geographical locations where God has revealed himself, including the places where Jesus lived and ministered, provides a logical point of departure for this pilgrimage exercise. Although more focus could be given explicitly to Old Testament sites, visits to places like Nazareth, the Galilee, and Jerusalem will take precedent, with attention given to elements of the Old Testament world as encountered on a journey following in the footsteps of Jesus. In short, a pilgrimage to the Holy Land will provide a most helpful foundation, rooting the identity of the members of St. John's as individuals and as a congregation in the work of Christ.

The Protestant faith is also a faith of the Book and a historical faith. After the resurrection and giving of the Spirit at Pentecost, the church multiplied and spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Although Israel and the city of Jerusalem will forever be linked with Christian origins, Christianity is not a faith centered in any particular locale. Furthermore, much of the New Testament would be born out of the experiences of Christians in places like Greece, Asia Minor, and Rome. Celebrating the Scriptures as the authority for Christian life and faith, members of St. John's will benefit too from visiting the lands where early Christians like Paul traversed, spreading the Gospel and establishing Christianity as more than a regional sect. It is possible today to visit places like Ephesus, Athens, Corinth, and even Patmos, observing the same sights as Paul, John, and other early apostles. To gain a better sense of being a people of the

Scriptures and a better understanding of the New Testament itself, a journey through the Mediterranean is also essential for enhancing a sense of Christian identity.

The centrality of Rome in the Mediterranean world and in church history necessitates its consideration too as a destination for pilgrimage. Luther's own disappointing journey to the eternal city and his well-documented squabbles with the papacy also link the capital of Roman Christianity with the Reformation. Not discerned at this point is whether or not a visit to Rome should coincide with an excursion highlighting Paul's missionary endeavors, with a trip to Reformation sites, or whether it should be a stand-alone journey. Regardless of timing, an excursion to Rome will only benefit the broader sense of Christian identity and will be made if at all feasible.

Lastly, and perhaps most poignant for St. John's, is a visit to Germany and the sites of the Reformation. Locales like Wittenberg, the Wartburg, and even Heidelberg loom large in Christian history and are representative of places the congregants of St. John's should visit to grasp the meaning and significance of the theological heritage they have inherited in Cullman, AL. Although St. John's was ethnically German in its founding, it is also a possibility other reformation cities like Zurich and Geneva might provide additional insight into the whole of the Reformation, particularly the Reformed strand that would influence the Heidelberg Catechism. To be sure, an understanding of Luther's influence and the faith espoused by the Heidelberg Catechism are most important and will take precedent in determining any itinerary. An interesting addition for the members of St. John's would be an excursion to Frankweiler, Germany, the birthplace of the Cullman's founder John G. Cullman. Likewise, a suggested option for

members who have German heritage will be to plan personal visits to ancestral cities, towns, and villages, informing further a personal sense of identity.

Beginning the Journey: Israel in the Spring

Chapter six established the universal identity of Christians, highlighting notions of redemption and justification, as well as the status of believers as children and friends of God. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the view Christians could rightly consider themselves pilgrims, aliens and strangers seeking a better, heavenly city. This understanding of one's identity is foundational for members of St. John's and provides the basis for any other sense of the self and/or the congregation. To this end, a pilgrimage to Israel is proposed for Spring 2011. Paramount in this excursion is to walk where Jesus walked, experiencing the geographical space and beauty as he did, while reflecting on his teachings and the teachings about him in the places where he lived and worked.

Because I have never traveled to Israel, it will be necessary to use an established travel agency or tour company to make this pilgrimage. There are pros and cons to such an approach. On the plus side, itineraries to the most important sites are always included and detailed scheduling is completed by professionals accustomed to designing a manageable agenda, often including prearranged visits to heavily trafficked sites that require reservations. From a financial perspective, such trips can be more expensive than if an individual seeks the best deals and makes his or her own arrangements. However, this is tedious, time consuming, and is simply not wise if a large group is involved, especially when unfamiliar with the workings of a foreign environment. Another plus of

the tour group is the price is inclusive of most meals and admission fees, as well as a knowledgeable guide, familiar with the significance of the many locations visited.

The drawbacks to using a tour agency are significant, the biggest being tight scheduling. Too often these types of tours cater to short attention spans and tend to rush travelers from destination to destination, leaving little time for stillness and meaningful reflection. Likewise, this approach typically leaves little time to wander, to venture from the beaten path and experience the culture (good and bad) in a less touristy way. This shortcoming cannot be overstated, but rarely do individuals have the financial liberty and unencumbered occasion to travel so freely. Because slowing down to the preferred pace would have the unfortunate consequence of disqualify would be travelers, using a tour company for this journey is the best option.

A lack of knowledge of the area and of tour organizers for Israel excursions has made the decision of which agency to use an exercise in educated guessing. Based on one recommendation and poor customer service with another group, I chose Educational Opportunities Tours for our journey. Though they will customize tours upon request, we will not have enough travelers to make that option financially feasible and will, therefore, sign up for one of their pre-arranged departures. Generically, our itinerary is as follows:

Day 1 – Depart USA
Day 2 – Arrive in Israel – Caesarea Maritima
Day 3 – Tabgha, Peter's Primacy, Mount of the Beatitudes, Capernaum
Day 4 – BetShean, Megiddo, Cana, Nazareth
Day 5 – Qumran, Jericho, Jordan River
Day 6– Bethlehem
Day 7 – Jerusalem
Day 8 – Jerusalem
Day 9 – Masada, Dead Sea

Day 10 –Return

Enhancing the Journey:
Examen, Lectio Divina, Journals, Labyrinths, and Photography

Because humans are inherently spiritual beings, the issue of spiritual formation is never a question of *if* but of *how*. As M. Robert Mulholland contends, all human life is spiritual formation.[2] In other words, everything we do influences our spirituality, and we must examine what kind of formation we are engaging in, remembering that Christ formed in us should always be our intention (Gal 4:19).[3] It will not suffice, then, to travel to these places without some intentionality. In other words, preparation can be made before the trip and exercises can be practiced during the pilgrimage to effect a most enjoyable and meaningful experience. For this we can draw on issues addressed previously in the Spirituality Cohort and from recent activities at St. John's. Specifically, self-examination, time in the Scriptures, journaling, walking the prayer labyrinth, and photography can all enhance each of the proposed pilgrimages.

Examen

If Christians are to discover who they are and are called to be, they must be aware of God's activity in and among them both in the past and present. The Examen prayer can aid the physical pilgrimage in important ways, founded in the biblical mandate to remember (Chapter 6). Tradition suggests knowledge of God and self are intertwined.

[2] M. Robert Mulholland, *Shaped by the Word: The Power of Scripture in Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: Upper Room, 2000), 25-26.

[3] Richard Averbeck, "Spirit, Community, and Mission: A Biblical Theology for Spiritual Formation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2008), 28.

John Calvin tells us, "Our wisdom, insofar as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes and gives birth to the other." He adds, "the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are bound together by a mutual tie…"[4] Likewise, knowing people are made in God's image is imperative for knowing who they are and is telling of who God is. Christ's love for humanity is the penultimate example of human worth in God's eyes, and the Scriptures themselves are clear about the need for examination to identity and growth. Psalm 139:1, for example, declares, "O LORD, you have searched me and you know me," extolling how wonderfully made humanity is (v. 14) and indicating that self-knowledge is impossible apart from the Creator.

Lamentations is explicit in its command for examination, "Let us examine our ways and test them, and let us return to the LORD" (3:40-42). In the New Testament, Paul exhorts us, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves" (2 Cor 13:5). Additionally, Jesus speaks clearly to the issue in the Sermon on the Mount, saying, "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye" (Mt 7:3-5). Self examination, then, is a clear imperative of the biblical text, purposed to aid faithfulness toward God and neighbor.

[4] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 4, 6.

The prayer of Examen offers an opportunity for self examination and encompasses two distinct elements: examination of consciousness and examination of conscience. The former, according to Foster, helps individuals, "discover how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we have responded to his loving presence." He continues, "God wants us to be present where we are. He invites us to see and to hear what is around us and, through it all, to discern the footprints of the Holy."[5] In examination of conscience, on the other hand, Christians lay bare before God to become aware of those areas that need to change and of the planks that need to be removed. Through examination, in short, practitioners become aware of who they are and of God's loving presence. For our purposes, we will focus primarily on examination of consciousness, seeking to increase our awareness of God's presence, recognizing, though, an examination of consciousness will prompt some examination of conscience. This will aid us in discerning who we are as Christians as well as who we are at St. John's by observing how God has been at work in our midst. The Examen, then, is a prime means of remembering what God has done and how he has been active.

Lectio Divina

Self scrutiny apart from the Bible, however, might well be an exercise in narcissism. Protestants naturally turn to Scripture as their primary guide for the faithful life and find there no shortage of proclamations and examples of the power of God's word for transformation and spiritual growth. A particularly poignant example in the Old Testament is Ezekiel's encounter with God in which God gives him a scroll with written

[5] Foster, 27-28.

words to be spoken to God's people. Ezekiel, however, is not to proclaim immediately these mournings, laments and woes: he is first to eat the scroll itself, suggesting that God's words are to be ingested and digested before they take effect. Once they nourish the servant, then the servant transformed may in turn speak the word of God in accord with God's will (Ez 2-3).

The New Testament too details the transforming power of the Scriptures. For example, Hebrews 4:12-13 tells us, "the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account." Perhaps more poignant is 2 Timothy, which reminds us that the Scriptures make us wise for salvation (3:15) and informs us that, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (3:16-17). Holy Scripture, paramount in spiritual formation, grounds pilgrimage in God's inspired revelation. Reading, studying, and praying the Scriptures, before and during the pilgrimage will enliven the experience, while the travels will also illuminate the reading and study of God's word.

If the goal of pilgrimage is about discovering identity and if the larger goal of the faith is to see Christ formed in individuals, then the practice of *lectio divina* will prove a helpful exercise as a part the pilgrimage experience. Rather than reading God's word merely for information, *lectio divina* seeks a reading that is relational. It requires listening

and embracing. Michael Casey tells us in *lectio*, "We approach our reading as a disciple comes to a master: receptive, docile, willing to be changed."[6] He adds, "We are seeking God. We are hoping to hear God's voice and to do God's will, but we are operating in search mode. We have not yet attained the goal of our ambition, and so our reading is fundamentally an expression of our desire for God."[7]

Norvene Vest similarly writes, "*Lectio* turns to the scripture for nurture, comfort, and refreshment. *Lectio* is an encounter with the living God; it is prayer…" and later proposes, "Effective *lectio* stems principally from silent attentiveness to the word of scripture in relation to the specifics of each individual life. Effective *lectio* emphasizes openness to personal encounter at the unique intersection of life and scripture."[8] Read in this way, the Bible becomes personal; it supplies food for the soul.

As a practice, *lectio divina* typically consists of reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating. Reading is our hearing of and listening to the text. Meditation is a time of entering into the text affectively and imaginatively, allowing it to speak to us. Praying the text is our responding to God through spoken prayers, asking God to bless the Word to us. Contemplation is living the text, sometimes viewed as resting silently in the presence of God and sometimes as seeking to live in the presence of God throughout daily life.[9] In short, *lectio* challenges practitioners to sit quietly with the Word, providing an

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[6] Casey, Michael. *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*. Liguori, MO: Ligouri/Triumph, 1995, 6.

[7] Ibid., 8.

[8] Norvene Vest, *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scriptures in Small Groups* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2004), 11, 14.

[9] Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 90-117.

opportunity for concentration and solitude in an oft busy and scattered world. More importantly, however, the discipline is a means of listening earnestly for God. It is a means of praying relationally as God speaks and works through Scripture. In the context of pilgrimage the exercise will allow God's word to speak to the identity and calling of his children. We might add here, that as the series of pilgrimage progress physically to the land of the Reformation, *lectio* can and should be applied to readings of the Heidelberg Catechism as well. Undoubtedly, pilgrims acquire much knowledge on their journeys. The practice of *lectio* does not intend to replace historical and theological knowledge but to allow information to shape pilgrims into the people God intends them to be. The actual practice of *lectio* will be encouraged for participants before and during the journey and will be practiced in group settings depending on scheduling constraints and appropriateness within the context of certain environments.

Journaling

A third practice valuable for pilgrims is journaling. As a spiritual discipline, it is not as clearly defined biblically, but there is evidence in Scripture that implies not only its warrant but its relevance, and like Examen, journaling is a fundamental means of practicing the biblical directive to remember (Chapter 6). First, the very existence of a written text is telling that written remembrance is important. Recording the acts of God in human history in the Old and New Testaments serves as the church's journal of God's presence and activity. The Bible might be viewed as an account of divine activity and human response or as an account of divine-human interaction.

More specifically, however, are commands to write. In the Old Testament, we turn again to Deuteronomy six recounts the Lord's command to Moses to write the words he has given so that they will not be forgotten (6:9). He later reminds him to write them so that in remembrance and obedience the people will live long, blessed lives in the land he is giving them (11:20-21). Furthermore, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel all receive the command to put to paper that which God has spoken (eg. Is 30:8, Jer 30:2, Ez 43:11). Even the Psalms and Proverbs might be viewed as personal remembrances put to corporate memory through writing.

In the New Testament a prime illustration comes from Luke, who writes, "Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught" (Lk 1:3-4). The physician's writings indicate, then, the need to record systematically the works of God for public memory. These examples illustrate that writing has preserved the story the whole church needs to hear to be faithful. Similarly, recording personal stories will benefit pilgrims in their own journeys within the context of the larger church.

The discipline of Journaling helps the disciple tap into this living past that continues to shape the faithful, giving further definition to present identity. Richard Peace simply and succinctly extols the significance of journaling for spiritual formation, writing, "Journaling helps us pay attention to God. It is a way of hearing and responding to God. Journaling helps us understand our unfolding story. Knowing our story helps us to see what God has been doing in the past, is doing now, and is calling us to do in the

future."[10] In sum, journaling enhances the biblical call to remembrance by asking those who practice it to relive past experiences, whether from childhood or the previous day.

Taking time to reflect on life's journey, allows opportunity to be quietly with God, allowing him to show his love and affection, as well as provide occasion for personal response. Practicing the discipline of journaling teaches the Christian to articulate what God has done and invites a deeper appreciation and knowledge of his grace and mercies. While on our journeys, writing will prove valuable in discerning how God is present and speaking to us. Journaling, in other words, will deepen our understanding of the pilgrimage we are taking, both physically and metaphorically.

The Labyrinth

A couple of recent activities at St. John's will prove helpful for a pilgrimage too. Included in the new facility completed in the fall of 2010 is a prayer labyrinth, a "symbol of journey and spiritual renewal"[11] that allows its users to reflect on who God is and how he is at work in their lives. While the first recorded appearance of a labyrinth in a church was in the early 300s in Algeria, the famous labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral, on which the labyrinth at St. John's is roughly modeled, was built around 1200 and is symbolic of the popularity of labyrinth use in the Middle Ages. "The labyrinth," Schaper and Camp write, "has been used for centuries as a pilgrimage, a way back home. When Christian pilgrimages could not get to Jerusalem, they walked the labyrinth."[12] Walking the

[10] Richard Peace, *Spiritual Journaling* (Colorado Springs: NAV Press, 1998), 7.

[11] Donna Schaper and Carole Ann Camp, *Labyrinths from the Outside In* (Woodstock, VT: Skylight Paths , 2.

[12] Ibid., 1.

labyrinth allows individuals to reflect on their own metaphorical pilgrimage. "By walking a labyrinth, one can travel long distances in a small space. The labyrinth walk overflows with metaphor and meaning. The labyrinth represents a journey, a pilgrimage, a conscious taking of time to seek God."[13] The use of the labyrinth prior to a trip to Israel, Greece, or Germany will heighten the sense of our greater pilgrimage and prepare pilgrims for the physical journey.

Photography

Finally, a photography retreat was taken in the winter of 2010. The intent of this endeavor was to create an environment in which participants might learn to pray with their eyes, that is to say they might learn to become more adept at seeing God's handiwork throughout his creation and responding appropriately. The assignment, capturing creatively the days of creation, provided a framework in which to explore God's world. Likewise, seeking to see God's creation in new ways and from unique perspectives could also prove helpful for those interested in photography on a pilgrimage. For that retreat we offered an afternoon crash course into photography and a similar class can be planned for our pilgrims. Both photography and journaling will prove highly valuable in sharing the experience with the congregants.

Pilgrimage in and of itself is a valuable endeavor. The above disciplines, however, will serve to enhance the overall journey. Besides these activities, a variety of readings can be suggested and/or short courses can be offered prior to the trips to provide pertinent historical, theological, and biblical information. Taken together these practices

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[13] Ibid., 62.

provide a well-rounded means of building disciples and community, as well as an invaluable curriculum for our primary purpose of exploring who it is God has made and called us to be.

Sharing What We've Discovered:
Pilgrim Experiences for the Family of Faith Back Home

A pilgrimage should benefit not only actual travelers but also should inspire the entire congregation. A time to share what was gleaned from pilgrimage is of supreme importance if the congregation as a whole is to garner a better understanding of their identity as Christians and members of St. John's. This will be done in three primary ways: testimony, journals, and pictures.

Spoken testimonies can be shared in the context of Sunday school classes, Sunday morning worship, or through a special event held for those interested in the trip. Sharing journal entries, either as a specially produced document or via the church website, will provide opportunity to explore how the journey personally shaped the travelers' faith. Finally, in a visual culture, pictures will be an important means of communication, a powerful source of inspiration and reflection. Informally pictures can be displayed in any talks given about the trip and better shots can be used for a more formal artistic display in the Atrium (which houses the labyrinth and has been used as an informal art gallery during this first year in the new facility).

Assessing our Progress: How Did We Do?

The ideals for the proposed journeys quickly gave way to reality when a number of unforeseen issues altered the intended course of action for the first leg of the

pilgrimage. In 2010 our Senior Pastor began discussing informally his plans for retirement with possibilities ranging from the end of the year till sometime in 2011. Indeed, it appeared that the latest date for his departure would be December 2011. (As noted in Chapter 2, that date later changed to the summer of 2012). Because it appeared his departure might prove to be sooner rather than later and under the supposition that I might be called upon by the congregation to serve as interim Senior Pastor, I believed if I were to set these pilgrimages in motion for St. John's and to be able to report progress to Fuller Seminary, I would need to proceed immediately. By late summer of 2010, having informal approval for pilgrimage as a final project, I set in motion a trip to Israel for June 2011. Although most tour operators suggested a minimum of a year's notice for their expeditions, I believed the members of St. John's would be able to proceed with less notice. Indeed, I was overwhelmed with the number of people who exhibited serious interest. Whereas I expected twenty to twenty-five would be genuinely attracted to the prospect of a trip to Israel, at least forty to fifty conveyed their desire for such a pursuit. This number does not include several inquiries I deemed less earnest. However, the seasoned advice of the travel agencies proved more accurate than my own assessment. Costs and a host of scheduling conflicts prohibited both individuals and families from making the pilgrimage. Previously, I had speculated a total of eight to twelve pilgrims would in actuality accompany me on the journey but only three other individuals would make the final commitment. The overall interest, however, is telling of the potential for this practice for St. John's. Even as my own future at St. John's is now uncertain, if I

remain with the congregation, I will consider another pilgrimage to Israel before proceeding to follow in the steps of the Apostle Paul or Luther.

Other issues also hindered the proposed plans for the journey. Now rushed to prepare for a departure less than a year away, I was motivated to complete other school projects and the formal final project proposal as quickly as possible so that I could proceed with pilgrimage plans. The energy required to complete these tasks left me in a state of academic burnout by the end of 2010 and I found myself bereft of energies for writing in early 2011. Added to this was a larger preaching responsibility than usual for the early months of the year and I simply made no progress toward the final project goals. Finally, health concerns in the spring further hampered my plans to work on the written aspects of the final project and develop a curriculum for our small band of travelers. There is no doubt my plans were ambitious, but I also had the option of an extended study leave in the late spring of 2010, just prior to the pilgrimage, to work on the formal portions of the project and to prepare the pilgrims. These extenuating circumstances, however, prompted me to forego the study leave and I resolved to simply let the trip be what it would be on its own terms. In short, whether motivated by pride or impatience, my decision was hastily made and several goals for the pilgrimage were not obtained, particularly in terms of the number of participants and their preparation.

Rating Our Preparation

Virtually no steps were taken to prepare for the journey as I had intended. The low number of participants removed any sense of real community building I had hoped

for through special meetings or classes. My own burnout and physical schedule only fueled my lethargy in this respect. I did make two book recommendations, *Where Jesus Walked: A Spiritual Journey through the Holy Land* by R. Wayne Stacy and *The Jewish Connection to Israel, the Promised Land: A Brief Introduction for Christians* by Rabbi Eugene Korn, which my fellow pilgrims read, and I also secured from Educational Opportunities a pre-departure study guide which included relevant Scriptures for us to read to prepare for the places we would visit. By virtue of our small numbers, this pilgrimage seemed to develop more as an exercise in individual piety than an opportunity for discovery of congregational identity. In this respect, the preparation was adequate. Furthermore, there is no finally preferred method on how to prepare for a pilgrimage. Whereas intensive study can be informative, an expectation-free experience can be equally meaningful. Ultimately, the only necessary preparation is prayerful attentiveness to God's leading before, during, and after the journey.

Rating Our Pilgrimage

In spite of the disappointing numbers, which meant the trip lacked a wider community-building component for members of St. John's, the pilgrimage itself was fantastic. Expectations, both pro and con, of using a professional tour company were exact. The pace was rushed at moments, the food was sometimes mediocre, and there was not enough opportunity to venture off on one's own. However, we were placed with another small group, and traveled with a group of about 20 total individuals, making the pace better than if we had been in a group of 40-50, which is not uncommon with professional travel organizations. Overall, meals and other amenities were adequate to

good and many evenings were free for those with energy left to explore cities and towns after nightfall.

Particularly noteworthy regarding the pilgrimage itself is how unexpected moments prove to be the most valuable. Cultural and geographical encounters provide eye-opening, beautiful, disconcerting, deeply moving, and even hallowing experiences. Reading Scriptures, engaging fellow pilgrims in conversation, listening for the voice of the Divine, and seeing sights not before witnessed, all combine to create and environment in which the traveler opens up to encounter God, and encounter God the pilgrim does. Informal conversations with fellow travelers from St. John's confirm as each traveler walked away with a better understanding of the world God has made and the life of faith to which we are called.

Rating Our Return

Compared to our preparation, our time of sharing with the congregation proved much more successful. This occurred informally in many conversations we have each had with other members and formally in three primary ways: two presentations and a photography exhibit. The first presentation was held during the Sunday school hour and consisted of pictures, short testimonies from travelers, and a question and answer session. Interestingly, the primary questions of the approximately seventy-five gathered were about safety concerns. The second presentation came in the form of a Sunday morning worship service I planned, using journal entries and employing my wife's musical talents. Entitled *A Pilgrim's Progress: Reflections on the Christian Life from Israel*, I took various journal entries and fashioned them into devotional reflections to share with the

congregation. As I shared a series of four reflections, images from the trip were projected to provide a visual representation of the sights inspiring my remarks. After each reading, my wife shared the same theme in song, providing a time of further reflection. These reflections can be found in Appendix A. Finally, approximately thirty photographs of mine and of another traveler were chosen and displayed for the congregation. Called *People, Places, and Passageways*, the presentation includes pictures that highlight each of these themes and shares the images that moved us while in the Holy Land. The accompanying text to those photographs can be found in Appendix B.

One or two adjustments to improve how the journey was shared with the congregation are notable. First, a travel blog for reflections and pictures could have been set up for members back home to follow the journey, daily experiencing with us these new encounters. This would have required more intentional reflection each day on the part of the participants and perhaps distracted from the sense of being away. However, had journaling been properly emphasized prior to the trip, a more formal devotional manual, either physical or web-based, could have been produced to share the experience amongst a wider segment of the congregation, thereby creating the sense of community and identity hoped for from the outset.

Pilgrims in the Know—How We've Grown. The Group Responds

The Israel pilgrimage provided an appropriate departure for ventures abroad at St. John's. Though there were fewer participants than expected, the trip prompted appropriate reevaluation of means to the end of leading the membership to a deeper understanding of the congregation's identity. Indeed, positive steps have been made to

that end because of this project and that particular excursion. Furthermore, lessons for future pilgrimages have been learned and can be implemented more intentionally in the future.

Where Do We Go from Here?

As a part of the follow up, I have reexamined not the goal of this project but the means to the end, while also seeking more specific feedback from my fellow travelers. The goal of this project is still needful: members of St. John's have room to mature in their understanding of their identity in Christ and urgently need a sense of identity as a congregation. In spite of my own mixed reviews of the first pilgrimage, the discipline remains a valid means of capturing that identity, particularly if travelers share their experiences and knowledge with larger segments of the congregation.

Having completed one pilgrimage, however, a number of alternative methods to this same end have become evident. Because the Heidelberg and Evangelical Catechisms reflect so well our theological heritage, a brief course in church history with these two documents at the center would prove to be helpful. Such a class could be conducted as an end in itself or as a part of the preparation for a pilgrimage to Germany. Similarly, a personal pilgrimage to the suggested sites could be made with the intent of reporting daily to the congregation written reflections, videos, and pictures in the form of an online devotional guide. Alternatively, the same journey could be made with the intent of collecting materials to be shared after the journey either via a devotional guide or in a traditional class setting. Relevant literature could likewise be assigned to supplement weekly conversations and lectures.

Another possibility would be to take the same information and present it in a retreat setting. Here only basics would be shared with the intent of retreatants savoring deeply the information in *lectio* style meditations, homilies, and possibly through *examen* exercises and a series of labyrinth walks. Finally, a sermon series, offering biblical, historical, and theological reflections on the name St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church, could be offered for the benefit of the congregation learning together during the most important time of the week for the congregation, namely Sunday morning worship.

Though I am not suggesting I have incorrectly valued group pilgrimage, these options simply suggest there are other ways of training larger segments of the congregation about who they are as a unique body within the wider church. Of these possibilities, numbers three and five seem the most adaptable to present needs. Indeed, I preached the sermon series proposed in number five beginning in the winter of 2012. In a series of three conversations I discussed what the terms Church, Evangelical Protestant, and St. John's mean for our congregation. The sermon on the church provided the foundation for what Christians are to be about as members of Christ's body. The second discourse on Evangelical Protestant was the most significant, highlighting the key themes of the Reformation and Evangelical heritage of nineteenth century Germany. Finally, I offered general observations about how John's gospel might give shape to the character and ministries of the congregation. Somewhat to my surprise, the congregation received the series with great interest and appreciation. So although the first pilgrimage did not take shape according to plans, the overall all intent of the project bore fruit through this sermon series and our previous addresses inspired by the trip to Israel.

Was it Worth it?

As a follow up to the Israel pilgrimage itself, I informally queried the travelers with a variety of questions. These informal discussions about the trip have all been positive and provided needful testimony for similar ventures in the future. The questions, adapted from personal experience, as well as the writings of Sally Welch and Douglas Vest, can be used for evaluating future pilgrimages. A sampling of the questions I asked included the following. What prompted your interest in going to Israel? What did you learn about yourself and your faith through this pilgrimage? What did you learn about the Church and the Christian faith through this pilgrimage? What did you imagine Israel would be like? How were your expectations accurate/met? How were they disappointed/ incorrect? What did you think the overall pilgrimage would be like? How were your expectations accurate/met? How were they disappointed/ incorrect? After this trip, would you distinguish between sightseers, tourists, and pilgrims? What were the three to five highlights of the trip? What made them special? Would you recommend a trip to Israel to others? What kind of preparation would you recommend someone make for going to Israel in the future? In short, these questions provide a broad analysis of the pilgrimage experience. Questions two and three, however, are indicative of the larger goals of this project and so are of particular importance. Indeed, the four of us who made the trip affirmed the experience as informative and transformative, highly commendable to any who are considering it.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

When the first German settlers arrived in north Alabama in the 1870s, they came with hopes and aspirations to establish a haven for expats who would form a German community with all the benefits of liberty promised in the United States. Though thrilled at the prospects of freedom and opportunity, they very much clung to their German identity, even billing their settlement die Deutsche Kolonie von Nord Alabama (the German colony of north Alabama). First among their actions was to establish a place of Christian worship that would reflect the beliefs and practices they knew in their homeland. That body, then dubbed First Evangelical Protestant Church, is formally known today as St. John's Evangelical Protestant Church and in affectionate simplicity as St. John's.

With its German-inspired traditions, St. John's and its theological heritage is exceptional among the Baptist dominated Bible Belt. Its distinctive character suggests an opportunity for a unique ministry in a prosperous, forward-thinking community. In terms both of worship and outreach St. John's has the opportunity to proclaim the good news of Jesus to a people simultaneously given to faith and to the many distractions that hinder faith. Indeed, the world St. John's inhabits today presents a challenging ministry context.

Hints of postmodern relativism, leisure-driven ambition, short and shallow attention spans, and myriad entertainment diversions jeopardize faithfulness to Christ at St. John's and churches across the country. Specifically, a relatively affluent membership at St. John's suffers from its own thoughtless acquiescence to current cultural trends. To be sure, there is a desire for God's word, but, as is the case in such matters, only time will prove if the membership genuinely desires a deeper, more mature faith.

The overarching motivation for this project has been that for St. John's to be obedient to the particular calling God has for the congregation the members must readily engage their past, discerning a sure sense of identity and, therefore, a sure foundation from which to move boldly into the future. The pragmatic response to the identity problem has been to propose pilgrimage as a viable discipline for discerning that identity. An additional benefit of pilgrimage is participants can grow in their personal faith, learning to see themselves as sojourners in this world while deepening their understanding of who they are in Christ.

Pilgrimage is a discipline with roots in the early church and, arguably, in Jewish tradition. It is not, however, a practice gone unchallenged. God's ubiquitous nature has prompted many through the ages to question the benefit of making long to journeys to experience a God who dwells in the human heart. Others, like Luther, have gone so far as to condemn the practice as wrong. Nonetheless, Christians have continued to venture beyond their immediate environment, and even to foreign lands, hoping to experience the places where God in flesh dwelt among humanity, where Paul preached, and where the saints modeled loyal devotion to Christ. Such a practice demands sacrifices of time and money, pulls believers out of their comfortable surroundings, exposes them to new

cultures and geographies, and introduces them to other peoples who share in the same faith but may practice it in a different way. In short, the discipline provides the practitioner with an invaluable educational experience and an opportunity to experience God's presence in new ways by leaving behind familiar routines.

St. John's is needful of pilgrimage in each of these respects—first, grounding congregants' identities first in Christ and, second, in the one-of-a-kind charge he has for the congregation. The cultural penchant for leisure generally and the membership's willingness specifically at St. John's to travel suggests the adventurous lure of pilgrimage is exactly the tonic needed to cure the deficient self-understanding that plagues the congregation. Through these excursions, pilgrims will mature by learning more about their biblically-based faith and encountering Christ in new ways through the places and peoples visited. A final excursion to Germany, the land of Luther, will prove most helpful for the congregation's self understanding. At that most critical juncture, members will begin to see clearly how St. John's is a church of the Reformation, sacramentally inclined, ecumenically minded, and liturgically oriented.

The pilgrimage process has actually already begun and with an initial journey taken to Israel in June 2011. There is no doubt the trip, hastily made as it was, proved to be a great success, indicative of the power of pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline. The final difficulty for the pilgrimage and this particular project was and is the timing. With my tenure at St. John's uncertain, the long-term commitment of any pilgrimage, let alone a series of journeys, is perhaps greater than should have been tackled. Still, a precedent has been set for the congregation to make future treks and seeds have been planted

because of the trip to Israel. The experience of examining Cullman, St. John's, pilgrimage as a discipline, and the respective histories of town, congregation, and practice for this project has been particularly valuable. So even if my term at St. John's does not allow me to complete the proposed itinerary, there are at least two critical outcomes. Generally, the theology and practice of pilgrimage can be implemented in any ministry context I find myself in the future. More specifically, the unintended benefit of discovering other ways to communicate meaningfully insights about St. John's identity resulted in a highly regarded, if only cursory, sermon series on the meaning of the church's name in early 2012.

In spite of changes in leadership, St. John's as Cullman's oldest church is poised for innovative directions in a rapidly approaching future. Before the congregation is a unique opportunity to seek Christ, seek God's will, and to commit anew to faithfully serving the Lord in a way that is true to God's plans for St. John's. The final hope is that the congregation will not trade genuine obedience for short-term success based on a model foreign to God's intent. St. John's must seek an authentic expression of the faith that accurately reflects God's call for this congregation in this community. In so doing the members will do well to consider diligently and thoughtfully the past to discern God's plans for the distant and not-so-distant future. By his grace, they will.

APPENDIX A

The following reflections are journal excerpts from the pilgrimage to Israel, shared as part of a Sunday morning worship service. Each reading was followed by a song performed by my wife, Tiffany, which reflected the journal theme. Four unique slide shows were also created for the presentation and projected as I spoke and Tiffany sang.

A Pilgrim's Progress
Reflections on the Christian Life in Israel
July 31, 2011

Truth and Life
June something (Friday) (Sabbath), Jerusalem

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.
Jesus, John 14:6

Maybe it's something in the desert air. Or all the rocks. Or maybe, just maybe, some important things actually happened here. Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and even Mohammed either settled in this place or passed this way. Their followers have too, claiming this land as sacred and then as their own. People are still coming today - Jew and Gentile, Christian and Muslim, people from every corner of the globe, representing every tongue and every nation, warriors and pacifists, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, adults and children, male and female - for a glimpse of some rocks and a breath of the air.

The place has inspired and still does. It isn't easily explainable. They are just rocks and air after all. Is it the result of East meeting West in a collision of cultures? Is it because of the dreams and vision(s) of the people who lived here? Did God choose this place and these people or did the people of this place choose God?

Whatever the reason, people are still coming and in droves. They're coming in decorative costumes and with cameras and with hopes and with prayers and in worship. Those coming are all drawn by the vision of faith, which will prove to be either a great hoax or a great truth. Indeed, I am drawn here trusting the latter is the case - moved and touched by rocks and air, and by the one who made them, the one who made us, and who said:
I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

Tiffany—Message in Song: There's Something About that Name/Holy and Anointed One (Bill Gaither/Praise Song)

Blisters

Wednesday Afternoon, June Something—Cana of Galilee

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith — of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire — may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Peter, 1 Peter 1:6-9

Today began with a 400 step climb out of Nazareth. I thought that was bad until the steep descent on a dusty path, full of loose gravel. I knew the blisters would come, but hoped they'd wait a day or two to appear.

I wonder if Jesus ever got blisters. I wonder if he got headaches, like the one that threatened to slow me down all day. I know he sought lonely places, but I wonder if he ever got lonely, if he felt alone.

- As I walked through the outskirts of towns I passed through wheat fields and imagined Jesus and his men plucking their fill on the Sabbath and Ruth gleaning on Boaz's land.
- I passed olive groves and wondered what Jesus was thinking as he made his way from Nazareth to Capernaum to continue his public ministry.
- I made my way through the Zippori forest, thinking about how dangerous pilgrimage has been through the ages and about the generosity of the good Samaritans along the way who have helped Christians on the way to their destinations.
- Pilgrims have always faced hardships and dangers: bandits to contend with and sickness to overcome, as well as hucksters waiting to take them for all they had if given the chance. Still, they made their journeys, hoping for blessings and a glimpse of the divine.

Pilgrimage, literal or figurative, hasn’t been easy in the past and we shouldn't expect it to be now. Not that it has to be intentionally difficult, but in the difficulties that will inevitably come, if the pilgrim will open himself, his weakness might be revealed, and there might be some blisters. But in the weakness and in the blisters, we might see the hand of God. …And if we persevere, we too will receive the goal of our faith—the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:9).

Tiffany—Message in Song: His Strength is Perfect (Steven Curtis Chapman)

More Blisters

Thursday afternoon, June something, Lavi

His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!

Jesus, Matt 25:21

The drawback to lunch at McDonald's was that it was cool, making the heat feel more intense when we went back outside to continue the hike. My journey took me through more fields and more olive groves and the long, winding way up a hill to the Kibbutz. My thoughts rambled today as I prayed for Tiffany and Vella and others. I pondered my own journey, wondering if hiking with blisters serves as some kind of penance.

Maybe they'll at least serve a purpose. There is no progress without blisters after all. Athletes train, scholars study, musicians rehearse. They do things to make themselves more excellent, refining their skills, honing their precision, training mind and body. It is much the same spiritually. We can seek excellence, that is closeness and faithfulness to Christ, or we can go through all life's motions, scarcely considering the calling God has for each of us.

But if we seek those opportunities to know God, if we receive those opportunities to walk closely with Christ, there will be some blisters, and there will be scars that remind us we are not as we should be, that we still have far to go, that we are still being refined for a greater purpose.

But along the way we just might be encouraged by the prospect of the words "Well done good and faithful servant." And so we press on, fighting the good fight, finishing the race, and keeping the faith, in spite of the blisters.

Tiffany—Message in Song: His Strength is Perfect (Steve Camp)

Grace

Saturday, June Something, Tiberias
P.M.

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.
"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth."
When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

Peter, 1 Peter 2:20-25

Limped on in to the finish line this afternoon with an aching back and aching knees and aching feet. Today's wasn't the hardest walk, but it was the most difficult. The fourth day in the sun, on gravely rocks, and up and down hills took its toll. Though the hike was all the way to Capernaum, the Church of the Fish and Loaves was my key destination. Capernaum is only a hop-skip-and-jump from the Church of the Fish and Loaves (or so I thought - it didn't feel like it). Arriving at the Church felt like the end of a glorious quest. I would like to say I saw visions and that great truths were illumined for me as a reward for my perseverance and dedication, but it was more about learning endurance than earning a reward.

Nonetheless, I was overwhelmed with gratitude as I inched my way to the monastery complex and into the church itself. Tired and weary, I had arrived in pain, wounded, and I realized we all arrive wounded.

I sat on the floor in the church, off to the side and away from the crowds, rested, watched the other gawking tourists, and enjoyed the subtle but real presence of God's comfort, the God who reminds us it is by his wounds that our wounds have been healed. A testimony to God's grace available to us all.

Tiffany—Message in Song: By His Wounds (Nicole Nordeman)

APPENDIX B

The following reflections are from a photography exhibit created by myself and another of the travelers to Israel for the congregation at St. John's.

People, Places, Passageways
Encounters with the Divine in Israel

People

Pilgrims flock to Israel to visit sacred sites, hoping to catch a glimpse of the divine. They come with cameras and prayers, some curious and some desperate. They come to give thanks and to receive. Some come in elaborate costumes and others in the distinctive or plain dress of their native land. Still others live here, making their home in the land of prophets, priests, and kings. The clash of the sacred and mundane is evident in the lives of residents and visitors alike. The clash of belief is also evident. There is doubt, dissension, and distrust, but there is also joy. There is laughter and there is hope.

People, Places, Passageways
Encounters with the Divine in Israel

Places

The people who come to Israel do so because they believe it is a special place. They come to see a river, desert, a lake, some mountains, and a city. But these aren't just dots on a map. Things happened here. *Important* things happened here. So the people flock to look at rocks and churches and mosques and museums, and they put their feet in the water, ascend mountains, and let the sand run between their fingers. Sometimes they begin to listen and sometimes they begin to see.

People, Places, Passageways
Encounters with the Divine in Israel

Passageways

Israel is as much a metaphor as it is a physical place. Throughout the country are roads, trails, streets, and alleyways, but these places aren't distinguished as simple earthly addresses. They are avenues to another world. Indeed, the country is full of passageways… to other times, other places, and to a greater truth.

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